

## Little Sparrow

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/27815887) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/27815887>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Mature</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings</a>
Category:	<a href="#">F/M</a> , <a href="#">M/M</a> , <a href="#">Multi</a>
Fandom:	<a href="#">Pirates of the Caribbean (Movies)</a>
Relationship:	<a href="#">James Norrington/Jack Sparrow</a> , <a href="#">Armando Salazar/Jack Sparrow</a> , <a href="#">Jack Sparrow &amp; Will Turner</a> , <a href="#">Jack Sparrow &amp; Elizabeth Swann</a> , <a href="#">Elizabeth Swann/Will Turner</a> , <a href="#">Jack Sparrow &amp; Edward Teague</a> , <a href="#">Jack Sparrow &amp; Elizabeth Swann &amp; Will Turner</a> , <a href="#">Jack Sparrow &amp; Bootstrap Bill Turner</a> , <a href="#">Joshamee Gibbs &amp; Jack Sparrow</a> , <a href="#">Hector Barbossa &amp; Jack Sparrow</a> , <a href="#">Black Pearl &amp; Jack Sparrow</a> , <a href="#">Calypso   Tia Dalma/Davy Jones</a> , <a href="#">Calypso   Tia Dalma &amp; Jack Sparrow</a> , <a href="#">Jack Sparrow &amp; Mermaids</a> , <a href="#">Cutler Beckett &amp; Jack Sparrow</a>
Character:	<a href="#">Jack Sparrow</a> , <a href="#">James Norrington</a> , <a href="#">Armando Salazar</a> , <a href="#">Will Turner</a> , <a href="#">Elizabeth Swann</a> , <a href="#">Hector Barbossa</a> , <a href="#">Joshamee Gibbs</a> , <a href="#">Crew of the Black Pearl</a> , <a href="#">Crew of the Flying Dutchman (Pirates of the Caribbean)</a> , <a href="#">Crew of the Silent Mary (Pirates of the Caribbean)</a> , <a href="#">Cutler Beckett</a> , <a href="#">Edward Teague</a> , <a href="#">Brethren Court (Pirates of the Caribbean)</a> , <a href="#">Jack the Monkey (Pirates of the Caribbean)</a> , <a href="#">Uncle Jack (Pirates of The Caribbean)</a> , <a href="#">Calypso   Tia Dalma</a> , <a href="#">Ian Mercer (Pirates of the Caribbean)</a> , <a href="#">The Mermaids (Pirates of the Caribbean)</a> , <a href="#">Original Characters</a> , <a href="#">Black Pearl (Pirates of the Caribbean)</a> , <a href="#">Gillette (Pirates of the Caribbean)</a> , <a href="#">Theodore Groves</a> , <a href="#">Lesaro (Pirates of the Caribbean)</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Age Regression/De-Aging</a> , <a href="#">Young Jack Sparrow</a> , <a href="#">Ghosts</a> , <a href="#">Monsters</a> , <a href="#">Supernatural Elements</a> , <a href="#">Magic</a> , <a href="#">Pirates</a> , <a href="#">Canon-Typical Violence</a> , <a href="#">Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence</a> , <a href="#">Temporary Amnesia</a> , <a href="#">Sort Of, Crossdressing</a> , <a href="#">The charms of Jack Sparrow</a> , <a href="#">future Jack/James/Armando</a> , <a href="#">James Norrington Lives</a> , <a href="#">Will isn't the captain of the Dutchman</a> , <a href="#">Jack is savvy</a> , <a href="#">Drunk Jack Sparrow</a> , <a href="#">Jack Sparrow needs a hug</a> , <a href="#">Post-Dead Man's Chest</a> , <a href="#">Canon Divergence - Post-At World's End (Pirates of the Caribbean)</a> , <a href="#">BAMF Jack Sparrow</a> , <a href="#">savvy?</a> , <a href="#">Smart Jack Sparrow</a> , <a href="#">everyone is confused</a> , <a href="#">and impressed</a> , <a href="#">but mostly confused</a> , <a href="#">sea creatures - Freeform</a> , <a href="#">Fuck Sao Feng!</a> , <a href="#">Salazar is scary</a> , <a href="#">Jones is So Done with Beckett</a> , <a href="#">Jack's Compass - Freeform</a> , <a href="#">The Pearl and Jack sort of communicate</a> , <a href="#">Soulbond between Jack and the Black Pearl</a> , <a href="#">Jack has an excellent booty</a> , <a href="#">Sex</a> , <a href="#">I Ship It</a> , <a href="#">Shipwreck cove</a> , <a href="#">The Brethren Court (Pirates of the Caribbean)</a> , <a href="#">Mermaids</a> , <a href="#">Sirens</a> , <a href="#">ships</a> , <a href="#">everyone loves Jack sparrow</a> , <a href="#">Everyone is protective of Jack</a> , <a href="#">Friendship</a> , <a href="#">Pirate King Jack Sparrow</a> , <a href="#">cursing</a> , <a href="#">Angst with a Happy Ending</a> , <a href="#">Parley</a>
Collections:	<a href="#">Video Game Alternate Universes/Endings</a> , <a href="#">Favorite POTC works</a>
Stats:	Published: 2020-12-01 Completed: 2020-12-30 Chapters: 30/30 Words: 115954

## Little Sparrow

by [YunaYamiMouto](#)

Summary

"Now up is down," was the last thing any of them heard before the rush of water drowned everything else out. Later, waking up on a random, deserted island, they almost immediately notice that something was not right with their Captain.

Sparrington, Salazak, Willabeth, maybe others mentioned.

# Chapter 1

It was madness, all of them agreed. Rocking the ship, so it would turn over? A sailor's nightmare, for once she was good and truly overturned, no vessel can be rightened again without serious damage to the sails or any machinery working the helm. And yet they had followed his lead, first unconsciously, for he had tricked them, and then with clear intent. They rocked and rocked and rocked the ship, releasing the cannons and cargo below deck, swaying the ship until she finally could no longer stay above the waves and just ... rolled over, as though a trained, faithful dog at her master's command. Hanging from the rail or the rigging or whatever else they had managed to get their hands on so they stay 'aboard' the ship, they had watched with fear and uncertainty as a madman's plan took place.

"Now *up*," he had said, hanging on just like them, no panic or worry in his voice whatsoever, confident in his escape artist skills, luck and wit, like always, to help him escape from this realm meant to never be escaped from. "Is *down*." That was the last thing they heard before the rushing water drowned out everything else, the Black Pearl's deck submerged under the waves, floating upside down, her hull greeting the sunset. They all waited with bathed breath - quite literally - under the water, holding on, exchanging uncertain, nervous looks, looking to the floating away barrels of cargo, rum and gun powder then to the Captain, who was holding on with only one hand, the other right next to it, seemingly petting the rail of the black ship in comfort and encouragement.

They didn't have the time to truly start questioning their own sanity for following through with such an insane plan or question whatever was left if the Captain's mind after his year long stint in his personal hell when the sun set and, even under the water and the Black Pearl, the Green Flash reached them before the water was rushing upwards, spinning, sucking, pushing, churning and who knows what else, seemingly rightening the Black Pearl back into the world of the living before everything went black.

Hours later, brown eyes opened to greet the early morning sun with a groan, a sea and hard work calloused hand reaching up to rub at an aching forehead as one William Turner Junior found himself waking up on warm sand, near the water edge, half soaked still from where he had been washed out with the morning tide, the love of his life, Elizabeth Swann, in much the same condition as him rousing next to him. He blinked several times, not understanding what was going on at all, memory gone and mind blank until he heard other groans, saw other people doing the same as he and Elizabeth were and witnessing an ever proud man already trying to get to his unsteady feet and a strangely, wildly dressed woman already staggering around the beach. Why did everyone else look like pirates?

And then it came back to him, the last four or so years of life, from the moment he had first laid eyes on Captain Jack Sparrow to the man's death at the hands-er tentacles of the Kraken - although recent events point all accusatory fingers at his fiancée since she had shackled him to his ship and left him to die - to the last year of sailing around the world, chasing rumors of a unique map that can take them to World's End and Davy Jones Locker with Captain Hector Barbossa, who had previously tried to kill them all. He remembered what had happened in Singapore and the unexpected meeting with James Norrington, ex Commodore turned pirate then reinstated and pardoned as Admiral of his Majesty's Royal Navy and the East India Trading Company under Lord Cutler Beckett after stealing the heart of Davy Jones from Sparrow on Isla Cruces and running off, who had ended up helping them escape Singapore by telling them the route plans. He remembered Ragetti and Pintel knocking him out at Barbossa's signal and having to drag the man all the way to the ship he had bargained with Sao Feng, the Pirate Lord of Singapore and South China Sea, for,

glaring at the old pirate all the way. He remembered meeting his two Lieutenants along the way and handing him off to them while they silently followed them to above mentioned ship. He also remembered having to help restrain the Admiral when he woke up from killing the two miscreants of Barbossa himself. By God, that man had anger management issues!

Will also remembered the strange and deadly path they took, falling off of the edge of the Earth and into the magical dimension of bellow, washing up on desert land, where they all then watched, stunned, as the Black Pearl with her Captain proudly standing on the main mast and looking off into the distance sailed through sand and into the water, both she and Jack completely ignoring the fact that what they had just done should have been *impossible*. Even for *Captain* Jack Sparrow. The following conversation had been interesting, awkward and very ... informative, to say the least. They found out about Elizabeth's betrayal and how the three Navy officers had decided to help them out - a combination of Norrington's guilt and Governor Swann's begging for him to get his daughter to safety and *away* from Beckett. A high demand, it had turned out. Will recalled how unnerved they were all with Jack's new strange behavior - he almost hadn't let them sail with him! Only Marty, Mr Cotton and his parrot, Tia Dalma and Tai Hung and his men. The rest of them ... Had Barbossa not had the Map, they'd all still be in the Locker.

The creepy journey through the world between life and death was, well, *creepy*. There was no wind, the sea under the Pearl barely moved yet they had sailed. For hours and days on end. Barbossa had all but given up on trying to figure out the Map, as had everyone else - Norrington went as far to call it as broken as Jack's Compass. Everyone, except Jack. Jack had sat down, played with the Map and its wheels for maybe an hour before he was on to it and they were rocking the ship.

Turner gave a start as he realized just what had happened, startling Elizabeth into reaching for her gun but she stopped herself before she fired, at the very last moment, Will staring down the barrel of her pistol. She hastily put it away, shakily got to her feet and walked over to where Barbossa was digging out his stuck monkey from the sand. "Where are we, Barbossa?"

"Did we make it?" Lieutenant Groves asked as he discarded his ruined blue coat, taking off his stocking as well now that they no longer had the fear of the arctic cold they had sailed through on their journey towards World's End.

"Or are we still stuck in the Locker?" The other Lieutenant, Gillete, asked, still trying to save what was left of his white wig. Dear god, he was more of a stuck up than Norrington! Then again, Norrington had changed clothes as they sailed the seas between the living and the world of the dead, staying only in his Admiral's coat and expensive shirt, everything else giving way to worn, tan breeches and leather boots.

"Ya mean ta say all that was fer nothin'?" Pintel thundered but shrunk away from the ex Commodore's glare. "Sorry." He mumbled sheepishly and tried to hide behind Ragetti, who was trying to put his wooden eye back in. The rest turned back to Barbossa.

The pirate captain huffed, standing up as Jack the monkey shook off the sand from his fur and settled on his shoulder. "How should bloody well I know? I'm not a map!"

"We're obviously no longer in the Locker." James pointed out with a gesture at their surroundings, a small beach surrounded by palm trees and a thick forest, a light breeze tickling their skin pleasantly. "This doesn't look like the desert we saved Sparrow from and there is wind, the sun is actually warm and the sea isn't still as death."

"Navy man be right," Tia Dalma, as surprising an addition to this quest as the three Navy officers, said in her exotic accented voice. They had mostly gotten used to her but no one seemed as at ease

in her presence as Jack was. She still had the ability to freak them out with how silent she can be, her sharp grins or how she knew what they were thinking without they ever even hinting at it. Gillete was so unnerved by her that he avoided her. Barbossa did, too, but that seemed ... almost personal. Jack had never shied away from her since they'd met up. "Dis ain't de Locker. We be back. We be in de Caribbean."

"Course we'd end up in that blighter's territory." Barbossa grumbled as the rest of the crew assembled and they counted heads. The Black Pearl's core crew had survived, but three of Tai Hung's men. Barbossa frowned. "Where be Jack Sparrow?"

"He's not here?" Elizabeth asked, half panicked already, looking around as Gibbs and Marty started calling out the eccentric man's name.

"He got through with us, right?" Will asked, not understanding what was going on. Jack had been on the ship along with everyone else when the Pearl had crashed back into the world of the living. Or ... "Did anyone see the Black Pearl?" Damn it! All of that, for nothing! The only ship that could catch the Flying Dutchman and help him free his father was lost again.

Norrington glared at him, affronted on the pirate Captain's behalf. "Your friend is possibly lost to a hellish world under the sea or beyond this world or *wherever*, and the only thing you care about is his ship?" He sniffed, looking down his nose at the shorter man. "I thought you a better man, Mr Turner."

"Why are you even here, *Mr Norrington*?" William snapped back, hand itching for his sword, Norrington's twitching in turn, as though he could sense him wanting to pounce. "Didn't you *want* to see Jack dead? You sure were eager to cut him down last time we saw you."

"You were no better." The Admiral hissed, hand settling on his weapon, ready to draw it when Gibbs got in front of the two, glaring at them with fatherly disappointment.

"That's enough outta ye both! Findin' Jack be more important than your little squabble! You," he rounded on Barbossa, who had been just watching with interest, arching a brow at the old sailor before the man turned to point to Elizabeth and Tia Dalma, too. Elizabeth gawked at him while Tia Dalma raised a challenging brow. For once, Joshamee Gibbs wasn't weary of the voodoo witch, too fired up he was. "And ye two! Ya want us ta sail to Shipwreck Cove! Well I fer one ain't gonna go to my possible death, which is all that awaits us should we return without Jack! So *you two*," he turned back to the two startled and chastised young men. "Stop yer cat fight an' start searchin' fer the Capt'n!"

He was panting by the time he was done, even a single trail of sweat sliding down the side of his face. The rest just gaped at him as though he had grown two heads and several more limbs. James at least looked properly chastised but Gibbs was wary of the glint in the young Turner's eyes. Will had not been the same since the day of the Kraken attack and not even getting Jack back had been enough to get him back to his old self. Oh, Gibbs knew he will never be the same 'whelp', Jack's whelp, that he'd been the first time they met or during their search for Davy Jones' heart and fleeing the Kraken. But William had become ... cold. To everyone. Even to Elizabeth. Scurfy, bitter, hungover ex Commodore Norrington seemed like a ray of sunshine to Will's current state, though the boy was doing his best to hide it. The best indicative that Will had changed was the way Jack had avoided him during their sail through the still sea. The Captain had an animal level instinct, not even needing his incredible intelligence to tell him that there was something ... *off* about a person. If Jack was keeping his distance, then young William was truly a danger.

"Let's go in search of our Captain, then." Norrington finally conceded, breaking the silence and choosing a seemingly random direction to start his search in. "Break off in pairs, search

systematically and throughly. If Sparrow has indeed crossed over with us, he can't be far. And where he is, so is the Black Pearl. Mr Cotton, if you don't mind ... " Said man scrambled after the tall ex Commodore's long strides, understanding the man needed silence and a little peace from everyone and everything before he had to deal with Sparrow. Gibbs nodded to confirm the order, taking Marty with him and heading in the opposite direction. Will stormed off as far away from the now no doubt once again disgraced Admiral, Tia Dalma hurrying after him, leaving a scowling Barbossa and Elizabeth. Groves and Gillete as well as Ragetti and Pintel were obvious teams and they went their own directions while Tai Hung divided his men in various directions.

The search didn't really last all that long, but it had still been an entire hours before any signs of Jack were to be found. Norrington had been storming through the jungle like forest in a fit, cutting down innocent plants on his way with Mr Cotton silently following, watching with weary awe as the foliage bent to the Admiral's will and sword. How *dare* that Turner!? He ended up being worse than Sparrow! Sparrow at least went back or waited for his men, even if said men tried to kill him or did something *stupid*. He always insisted on that falling behind rule when there was a chance they'd have to wait for him, yet he never supported his own words with action. He always waited and then made it up as he went. Turner had obviously only come because he wanted the Black Pearl for his own agenda.

'Well, not on my watch, Mr Turner.' He thought, swinging his sword hard enough for a branch to fly off and scare Mr Cotton's parrot into flying away in a panic. "Damn." He cursed, rubbing at his sweaty brow. "I apologize, Mr Cotton. It was not my intention to scare your parrot away." The mute man just shrugged and waved him off with half a grin. James felt guilt rising in him. "I am sure we can spare a moment to search for it before looking for Sparrow again." And wasn't that just ironic, searching for two birds at the same time. The twinkle in Cotton's eyes told the Admiral that he had seen the irony as well. He sighed and made to go in the direction the bird had flown off when it returned, fluttering around their heads and screeching for all that it was worth.

"Arrrgh! Captain on the deck! Captain on the deck! Arrrgh!" The bird repeated this for three or four more circles before flying off in the same direction, returning only when it realized they were not following it. "Arrrrrgh! Tremble me timbers! Arrrgh! Captain on the deck! Arrrgh! Captain on the deck!"

"I do believe we should follow?" James offered and started in the direction the parrot had come from, the bird quickly fluttering up ahead of him. Mr Cotton nodded and they spent the next few minutes trailing the bird while it screeched things like "Follow the wind!", "Shiver me timbers!" and "Captain on the deck." When it finally landed on a branch above a bush, Barbossa and Elizabeth appeared from another, Jack the monkey screeching and tittering as it climbed up the same tree Mr Cotton's parrot was sitting on. He was pointing down at the bush and jumping up and down on the branch he had chosen, making faces and trying to draw Barbossa's attention.

"What ye be doin' 'ere?" The pirate demanded, crossing his arms and glaring at the two men, Norrington returning it tenfold.

"This is *our* direction. How did *you* get here?"

"Jack started screechin' and ran off this way. We followed." Hector answered nonchalantly, not really in a hurry to see what Jack was pointing at since it could very well be another Jack and he wasn't very fond of a just waking Sparrow. The man tended to either blabber out the strangest things or reach for his gun and Hector hated to admit it, but he wasn't fast enough to react properly to Jack's draw. And he no longer had the security of Jack never harming him to protect him, since Sparrow was more likely to do it deliberately than spare him.

"Mr Cotton's parrot led us here, as well," James admitted as he slowly walked over with the mute on his side to whatever had the two animals so spooked or excited. Just as he came up to the bush, the other teams arrived, led by Tia Dalma and Turner.

"How did you guys get here?" James heard Elizabeth asking and Will explaining how all other routes led to steep cliffs or too thick forests to cross properly pretty soon after entering the forest, so everyone just returned to the beach and followed a path Tia Dalma chose at seemingly random. He stiffened when there was a groan from the shrubbery and the leaves and branches rustled with movement, his hand falling on his sword. The rest have gone quiet now, aware that there was something - or more likely someone - there as well and since some of the crew had had a very close encounter with cannibals, they weren't exactly eager to find out if this was another man eater's island by falling into the same trap they had last time. They were perfectly content to let brave ol' Commodore check it out first and if he survived, then great! If not ... Well, he was a good man and there would be a moment of silence to honor his noble sacrifice.

As he got closer, Norrington drew his sword slowly out of its scabbard, trying to make as little noise as he can. The two animals on the tree were watching him in a curious manner, looking between him and whatever the bush hide. The Admiral carefully grabbed some branches, making sure he didn't rustle the bush and, fast as lightning, swiftly drew them aside, sword pointing at whatever was on the other side. He nearly dropped it when big, confused and startled black eyes looked up at him. *Familiar*, enchanting black eyes but ... not the same.

James Norrington gawked.

"Parlay?"

## Chapter 2

"Parlay?" A youth in his eighteenth summer of life offered uncertainly, looking up at the tall, broad shouldered man known as Admiral James L. Norrington who was holding a beautiful, deadly sword at his throat through the bushes. The lad had dark, dark, dark brown hair, tangled and weaved in braids and dreadlocks and a seemingly infinite number of trinkets and beads, held in some fashion of order by a red, silk bandanna that went around his head. His skin was sun-kissed like only a sailor's could be, yet darker still, hinting at some native heritage. His features were still soft with youth and some manner of innocence, dark eyes lined with kohl, face clean shaven or lacking hair still. His sprawled body was lean and showed only slight signs of muscles born from working on a ship. He had long legs and delicate seeming arms, a swan like neck and a trim waist, all of it hidden under a loose white shirt, a dark vest, red sash around said trim waist and over it all a long, dark coat. The legs were dressed in form-fitting, dark breeches and boots adorned dainty feet, seeming a little loose at the moment. For all the elegance of the young man's limbs, he was at the very least a head or so shorter than Norrington.

He was handsome. No, *beautiful* was a word more fitting his features, smooth and caressed by the sun, sea and wind. And yet there was a deadly kind of intelligence lurking in those dark, dark eyes, studying Norrington from head to toe and to doubt figuring out as many ways to get around him as were possible far faster than anyone would think it possible. There was a belt holding a pistol and a sword at his waist, a ... strangely familiar compass hanging from it on a string, an equally familiar tricorne hat lying behind the sprawled youth.

Norrington's brain screeched to a halt. "S-Sparrow!?"

"What!?" The group behind the Navy man exclaimed and Jack automatically reached for his weapons, but James turned around to glare at them in warning, lowering but not putting away his own sword. The teen seemed to relax a little, very reluctantly, but he didn't draw his weapons. He *did* settle a hand on his gun, though, for protection.

"Arrrgh! Captain on the deck!" Mr Cotton's parrot screeched again, fluffing its wings, peering down at the ... different Jack Sparrow than he was used to seeing with bird like curiosity.

It should not have been as cute as it was that Sparrow was staring back at it and the monkey in much the same fashion, James chided himself. "Sparrow?" He called again to regain the younger man's attention and those unsettlingly intent eyes went back to him.

"Oh. So you *were* talking to me." His voice was surprisingly soft and not as deep as Norrington was used to. He heard his companions gasp in shock, obviously recognizing the strange youthful tone to their Captain's voice like he was. He hysterically, for one moment, wondered what their reaction will be when they see the pirate. He looked twenty years younger, for God's sake!

"Who else would I be talking to? Is there another Jack Sparrow I am not aware of?" He warily put his sword away, seeing no threat in the young man's - *Sparrow's* - face. Was that a *blush* he was seeing?

"Sorry. Not yet used to everyone calling me Sparrow quite yet. It's only been a month!" The youth protested, looking around and frowning at the beads he found lying on the ground between his feet. James recognized them as the ones that would have usually been braided into Sparrow's beard, had he had one at the moment. His hair was also a little shorter, Norrington noted as he watched the man tilt his head in confusion. "I'm surprised you even know it. I've been at sea for that whole month. But, I guess, rumors travel fast in the pirate society. Wouldn't be too impossible for you to



have heard it. I'm still getting used to it, you know? Being called Jack Sparrow. It's almost as though as remembering they mean *me* when they call for the Captain!"

"Wot nonsense is he blabberin' 'bout!?" Barbossa called from somewhere behind James as Jack the monkey skittered down to sit in front of Sparrow, baring his teeth at him. To Norrington's further surprise, the pirate just smiled and reached over to scratch the chimp's head. The monkey fairly gawked at the young man, even as he began rubbing his head pleasantly against skillful fingers, still bejeweled like before. Whatever had affected Sparrow physically and mentally, his clothing had not been affected except those beads from his beard.

"Aren't you a handsome fellow?" He grinned at the monkey and James was dumbfounded to see all of his teeth were white. There's a surprise! And he also had noticed how the impossibly drunken drawl Sparrow talked with even when he had not had rum in the Locker for a year was absent, Sparrow talking with a cultured, fully pronounced English dialect that very nearly had the proper British accent, too. He sounded like a highly educated man.

"What's going on over there?" An impatient Elizabeth demanded and James sighed, resisting the urge to rub his forehead. He could just *feel* the upcoming headache already. He blamed the eccentric pirate Captain for it.

"Why don't you see for yourself," he said, offering a helping hand to Jack. His monkey namesake had clambered upon his shoulder and was playing with some of his trinkets, the two for once content with each other. A first. Black eyes studied Norrington for a moment, seemingly searching for something in his face and green eyes only he could find before he accepted the hand with a minuscule smile that made his face even prettier. James pretended to not notice how he had grown surprising hot under his collar as he hauled the light man onto his feet, the pirate grabbing his hat, before guiding him into the line of sight of the rest of the Black Pearl's current crew.

More than one jaw dropped when they laid there eyes on the eighteen year old - apparently already Captain - Jack Sparrow.

"By the sea gods and the merciful Lord!" Joshamee Gibbs swore reverently, stepping closer, eyes wide with awe, fear, confusion, relief, fondness, weariness ... It was a long lost of the complicated mix of emotions the old sailor was currently feeling as he looked upon the youthful features of his young friend and Captain. *Familiarly* youthful features. "Jack?"

Black eyes studied him for a moment longer than they ever had, no matter how drunk, before recognition flashed through them and a genuine grin split the handsome face. "Why, if it isn't Mr Gibbs! How is the Navy treating you, my friend? Don't tell me that you're here to arrest me? Bad luck, that, arresting an innocent man on an unnamed, uncharted island."

"It really *is* you. But *how*?" The first mate asked with great confusion and a slightly panicked edge in his voice, still staring at the younger pirate.

"Hm? How what?" Jack seemed just as confused, but he wasn't paying much attention to the man or James or the group they were with, having turned his attention to the blue and yellow bird, offering his forearm for Mr Cotton's parrot. The animal went easily, already familiar with its Captain and this version of him held no malice, so it felt at ease with him. "I've heard of birds smart enough to talk, but I've only seen crows talking so far. You're a pretty one, you know?"

"Arrrgh! Wind in the sails! Wind in the sails!" The parrot preened and Jack laughed, a sound none of them had heard so genuinely amused before. Sparrow appeared ... gentler, somehow. Not world gardened quite yet. It was as though he had went back in time.

"So it worked," they all nearly jumped out of their skins when the voodoo witch spoke up, whirling around to look at her in confusion. Jack, his gaze falling on the approaching Tia Dalma, practically lit up.

"Tia Dalma! You're out of your little shack! What a pleasant surprise," he walked up to her, swept her hand up and placed a gentlemanly but familiar kiss to her dark cheeks, the woman smiling fondly at him. "It feels like eons since we've last met. Don't worry, I'm keeping the Compass safe, as per our bargain. Captain Morgan had handed it down to me the second he realized he was dying." He seemed suddenly subdued, fingers gripping above mentioned navigation device tightly in one hand, as if for reassurance. "I've been keeping it safe since."

"I know ye 'ave, ma Witty Jack." Tia Dalma practically cooed, caressing the young man's cheek comfortingly. "Ya've been doin' a great job o' it. Tia not worried fer da Compass, though." At his confused glance, she elaborated with another question ... not. "'Ow are ye fearin', hm? Feelin' fine? No anxiety? No hallucinations?"

"What are you talking about?" Jack asked, blinking in confusion even as Cotton's parrot and Jack the monkey went back to their respectful masters, who were still too stunned for words. Well, Mr Cotton at least had an excuse! The rest should be well used to the craziness that followed Jack Sparrow around like a second shadow.

"Yes, what *are* you talking about, Tia Dalma?" Elizabeth, having snapped back to attention from where she had been distracted staring at the handsome young man who was apparently Jack Sparrow, demanded with a glare at the voodoo woman. "What have you been up to that you've not told us about?"

Jack surprised her by glaring at her from over Tia's shoulder. "Watch how you're talking to her, lass. Not only should you respect your elders, but do you have any idea whom you're talkin'-"

"It be okay, Jack." The dark woman assured him, tugging his face back to face her. "Ye should know, too."

"Know what?" He and everyone else intoned together, confused and weary as to what sort of magical mischief might have Tia Dalma indulged in without telling them. The woman was dead serious, though, as she answered.

"Ye're not as old as ye think ye are, Jack Sparrow. Twenty long years 'ave passed an' den some since da time ye remember an' dem be long, painful, tryin' years." She began, her voice firm, making him listen without interrupting and *demanding* he accept it in stride. Sparrow remained surprisingly quiet, listening as she asked without words. The truth in her voice resonated through his soul. He wanted to understand, so he listened. "Yer soul grew weary from betrayals, from friends an' de like, but ye managed ta go on. But den a debt 'ad ta be repaid, ya failed ta escape an' ye were dragged t' da Locker by de Kraken." Jack gasped, eyes widening in surprise and fear but Tia Dalma continued before he could panic. "But we set off on a journey ta get ye back, travelin' to Workd's End an' beyon'. We found ye, a year later, an' de Locker 'as taken its toil on ya. Ye were hallucinatin' an' couldn't trust an'one. Ye were fallin' apart while tryin' ta hide it from everyone. But Tia saw and Tia knew she'd 'ave ta do somethin'. So I locked away the Jack Sparrow of de twenty years passed an' gave 'im time fer healin'. Ma spell resulted in ye. It were da only way to preserve yer soul, mind, sanity an' even body. Ye were *dead* fer a year." She stressed, sounding *stressed* as she said it, genuine affection for the boy before her obvious in her voice. "Da world not yet be ready ta lose ye, Witty Jack. Tia not yet ready ta lose ya."

"I understand." Jack replied after a long moment that everyone used to let it all sink in. They knew, without a doubt, that it was their fault that Jack had cracked. He had been fighting for his life and

had lived through three betrayals in a single day, all by people he had trusted. First Will, then Norrington and then Elizabeth, who actually managed to lead him to his death. A year worth of torture would drive anyone crazy. It was surprising enough that Jack had not fully succumbed to madness by the time they had reached him. But, then again, he *was* Captain Jack Sparrow.

Will blinked, stalking up to the four, incredulous. "Just like that? You won't say anything? Won't complain that she experimented on you without warning or asking you about it? Are you *daft*, Jack?! She could have killed you!" He threw his hands up in the air, too caught up in his emotions to notice how Jack inched closer to Norrington.

"Who are you?" The Black Pearl's de-aged Captain asked curiously, studying William's features and probably what he can tell about the man's personality with that uncanny perception of his. Will blinked, startled.

"You ... you don't know me?"

"Should I?" Jack asked in return, wondering at the half hurt, half shocked tone in the now older man's voice. "If so, I'm sorry. It's apparently beyond me, now."

"I'm your friend." Turner said softly, actually hurt at being so easily. "William Turner. You knew my father once."

"I did?"

"Bootstrap Bill Turner, or also William. You sailed together on your ship." Will tried again, as though that might jog Sparrow's memory. Yet there was no recognition in the teen's eyes, only a genuine apology that said it all. Will kind of just ... stared and stepped back, as though backing away would make it less true.

"So ... You don't remember any of us?" Elizabeth, also not left unaffected by this fact, asked, as if to make certain. Jack looked them all over, studying each face before he just shook his head.

"Sorry, but I'm only familiar with Mr Gibbs and Tia Dalma. But I knew them since I was a lad of twelve. The rest of you ... I must have met you all later." He shrugged, fingers twitching on his hat, uncomfortable with being with so many strangers that now knew more about his life than he did. It was as unsettling for him as it was for them.

Barbossa spewed curses that could make a Tortuga whore blush. "Wot the bloody hell are we ta do with 'im now?! 'E's useless to us now! The Brethren Court 'as been called upon and one of the Pirate Lords don't know his head from 'is arse! He doesn't even know wot his Piece of Eight is! He's not even a Pirate Lord anymore"

"Oy! You with the ugly beard!" Said offended Pirate Lord protested vehemently, glaring into Hector's ice blue eyes with disdain. "I'll have you know I am *indeed* a Pirate Lord! Have been for the past three weeks, *muchas gracias, mi fregón amigo*. Don't make assumptions just because I'm suddenly de-aged or something!" He huffed, crossing his arms. "*Tu eres muy estúpido y tapado, craso, viejo el hijo de perra!*"

Barbossa stared at him uncomprehendingly while the rest were wondering just what the hell he had said. "Since when do you speak Spanish, Sparrow?"

The teen blushed again, yet stubbornly kept glaring at Barbossa. "Since Armando found it sexy for me to speak in his native language and it always promised a good time or guaranteed whatever I wanted."

The ex Commodore by his side blushed to the roots of his hair, as did a few others in the group. Tai Hung and his men, though, just grinned lecherously at the pretty boy. Theodore Groves cleared his throat, his blush disappearing under his cravat while Philip Gillete seemed to be counting his prayers to not resemble a tomato. Too late for that. "Captain Sparrow, don't you think we should search for your ship?"

"Search?" The dreadlocked male tilted his head in confusion, his trinkets tinkling in the air. The Lieutenant shifted uneasily.

"Um, yes. We were kind of just washed out by the sea on a nearby beach. We've been searching for you and your vessel for a good hour, sir. Do you know where it is?"

"Even if 'e didn't, that Compass of his will." Barbossa harrumphed, grateful for the chance to fight down his own blush into submission. He should have known better than to ask. Damn Sparrow! "You sure you're a Pirate Lord, boyo?"

"You can ask the Keeper when we return to the Cove." Jack told him snappishly and Elizabeth sighed.

"The ship, Jack?"

He turned a suspicious eyes on her next, scowl still in place. "Why should I sail with any of you? I only know and trust Tia Dalma and Mr Gibbs, although you look familiar, mate." Jack said as he rounded on Norrington, looking him up and down. "Have we met before?"

"I don't think so, not until I nearly had you hanged in Port Royal four years ago." James said, arching an eyebrow when Jack grinned and snapped his fingers. It would seem that his hands were still as animated as ever.

"I know, now! You don't happen to be a Norrington, do you? In relation to one Admiral Lawrence Norrington? I swear, you look just like him."

Said man's son stared in surprise at the pirate Captain while Gibbs was doing a poor job in surpassing his smirk. "How do you know my father?" The rest were watching the exchange with interest, fairly staring at this point. Again.

Jack waved his question off, already turned in another direction. "Long story, mate. Maybe I'll tell you later. You said only my ship is here and we need to find it." Even with his back turned to them, Jack seemed to be able to sense Will and Elizabeth opening their mouths to answer and shushed them. "Quiet, I'm listening."

"That's quite enough," Gillete finally snapped, stalking up to the even more strangely acting pirate. "We are wasting time on some god forsaken island while you are *listening*? To what, if I may ask? Our sanity slowly dying? No need, I'll alert you when it's dead, if you're so interested."

"I said hush," Sparrow impatiently shoved the man away, seemingly straining his ears for a sound only he could hear.

"Jus' use da Compass!" Marty whined from Mr Cotton's side, but Jack's head had already snapped up like a hunting dog's ears on a hunch. He grinned and took off, hollering behind to them to follow him.

Having no choice, they did.

## Chapter 3

They ran through the twisting forest for about fifteen minutes, following Sparrow's mad, seemingly random dash as he weaved between trees and jumped over logs or bushes, speeding in a direction known only to him. He would slow down only for a second, stilling his breathing as though still trying to hear something before darting away again, just barely within the following group's sight. They felt like they were following some fey creature through an enchanted forest as they ran after him, only James' long strides making it easier for him to follow and Elizabeth's and Tia Dalma's smaller bodies that more easily allowed them to twist in between the trees.

Soon enough, Norrington had had enough and he sped up when he saw Jack slow down, all but lunging for him, catching him before he could run off again. He was panting as though he'd been fighting for an hour instead of just a run but the teen seemed completely okay, not a trace of sweat or exhaustion on him. "Slow down, Sparrow! Do you even know where you're going?"

"Of course I do! And I thought we were in a hurry, mate." The younger man replied, cocking his head again, listening. "We're not far off, now. I can hear her more clearly now. She's just beyond this bend."

"*Hear* her? Hear who?" A panting Will asked as he caught up, bending over and placing his hands on his knees to catch his breath.

"My ship, of course," Jack noted absently, looking up at James as though silently asking him to let him go. Norrington held on for a moment longer, waiting for everyone else to at least catch up with them before letting Sparrow go. And just like his namesake, Jack was off as soon as he was free, darting away and they had to run after him yet again. He at least slowed down a little now. However, he set out into a dead end run when they hit the beach, running towards what appeared to be a secluded cove or something, a grin on his face. Now that there were no obstacles, Turner could match Norrington as they dashed after Jack and Tia Dalma fell behind due to her dress.

"I never knew he were so damn fast!" Raggeti complained to Pintel as they ran, but no one quite paid attention to them, focusing on not tripping in the sand as they all raced after Jack. Jack had darted around and entered the cove when a cry came from him and James sped up even more, both he and Will taking out their swords, coming to Jack's rescue ...

Only he wasn't in trouble. He was looking up at the magnificent sight of his Black Pearl with something like pain and sorrow, a distraught look on his features, staring at the black hull and sails, the only bit of color left on the magnificent ship her golden figurehead.

"My ship ... What have you done to her?! Her white sails, her brown hull, her golden lining! My Wench." He whimpered, curling in his shoulders, almost like a wounded animal. "What have you done to my Wicked Wench?"

"What?" The assembled pirate all breathed around their panting, staring at Sparrow as though he had gone mad.

"That be the Black Pearl, Sparrow." Barbossa sneered, coming up to the younger Captain. "Or do ye not recognize 'er? Is she not yet yours? She be mine, then." He seemed rather cheered at the thought and reached out to clap Sparrow on the back, but the younger man caught his wrist in a surprisingly strong grip without looking away from his ship.

"Aye, I recognize her. Aye, she is mine." He looked up through his lashes at the older Pirate Lord,

black eyes flashing dangerously. "She says you've put a curse on her for your own greed. I should kill you for that. Are you the reason her cloud white sails are black and her hull is covered in ashes?"

"What?" Hector asked, surprised. "Ashes?"

"Witty Jack," Tia Dalma called, coming up to the two pirate Captains. "It not be Barbossa who did it."

"Then who was it?" Sparrow growled, showing a side of him none had seen so far. He didn't look like the harmless pirate he usually portrays himself as at the moment, instead he was brimming with aggression.

"We'll catch you up to speed in no time, Capt'n. Well, with the things we know." Gibbs offered. Jack looked at them all with not a small amount of distrust.

"No need. The Wicked Wench can tell me everything." The voodoo woman looked very interested at this. The rest just though Sparrow had lived through some kind of trauma that had made him crazier than ever if he thought a ship could talk.

"Ya still hear 'er?" Tia Dalma asked curiously.

"Of course. I always hear her, in my heart and in my soul." Jack replied immediately, voice softening as he placed a hand over his chest. "It's why I can always find her, why I chose *her* and not some other ship that day. She was calling to me and I went down to the docks and there she was. Looking at her, I knew no other ship will do, not after finding her and hearing her sing so shyly to me. She's bolder, now. Louder. I can hear her clearer."

"Dat be b'cause ye traded yer soul ta Davy Jones so 'e would bring 'er from the deep fer ya after she sank. She be black ever since." She said gently, almost cooing at him, as though not to startle a spooked animal. "Ya call 'er de Black Pearl dese days, Witty Jack. Whatever 'ad bound ya to 'er is much, much stronger now sat yer very soul is intertwined wit' 'er spirit."

"She sank," Jack almost whimpered, rushing towards his ship but stopping when Norrington held him back from simply diving into the deceptive shallows. If the Black Pearl was merrily floating in the cove, then the water must be much deeper and who knows what manner of sea creatures lived in the depths. "She sank."

"Aye, she did. Ya nearly died wit' 'er. She weren't 'lone." Tia Dalma continued, walking up to where the Admiral was holding back the Pirate Lord. She went to touch him but drew her hand back like she were burned, looking up at the black ship like a stubborn child denied their favorite toy. Jack had nearly folded himself into Norrington's hold and just stood there, watching his beloved ship. And he smiled, almost teary smile, but he suddenly seemed a lot cheerier right then.

"She likes her new look better." He told James with a grin, not bothering to extract himself from strong Navy arms. "So, who are you people? I only really know Mr Gibbs and Tia Dalma. and I know *you* are a Norrington, but I don't know your name." He looked around James at will and winked at the blacksmith. "And you're Will Turner. Can I call you Will?" William answered just with a smile and a nod, still uneasy with not being remembered. "So, who are the rest of you? It seems only fair for you to tell me since you all know me but I don't know any of you."

"My name is Elizabeth Swann," said woman was the first to approach the de-aged Captain, voice a little shake as she introduced herself, many emotions warring in her as she gazed at the black eyes, so similar yet so different from the eyes she was used to seeing. "It's a pleasure to meet your

acquaintance, Captain Sparrow."

"Jack, if you will." He smiled but he was studying her. "Hm, a noblewoman, aren't you. A bit far away from civilized society, surrounded by pirates and dressed like one yourself. Like adventure, Miss Elizabeth?" He grinned as she gawked at him. How had he known? He looked back at Norrington, arching an expectant brow at him.

The man gave him a flat look but complied. "My names is James. These are my friends, Theodore Groves," said man waved a little. "And Philip Gillete." The other Lieutenant nodded as a greeting before going back to scowling at Sao Feng's men. They were rather disturbing with the way they were leering at Sparrow. He wasn't overly fond of the thoughts that must be running in their heads as they stared at the teen. Bloody pirates.

"Capt'n, these are Marty and Mr Cotton and Mr Cotton's parrot. Finer sailors you will have trouble findin' in these waters. We've sailed with 'em fer two years and they fought the Kraken with ya." Gibbs introduced the two, who grinned at their Captain and Jack smiled back. He liked those two. He looked over curiously to the bantering pair of silly pirates known as Pintel and Raggeti and Gibbs introduced them, too.

Jack stared at them as Raggeti lost his wooden eye - *again* - before rounding on Barbossa with a skeptical look in his eyes. "Are you *sure* you're a Pirate Lord? What sane Pirate Lord would leave their *Piece of Eight*, the very proof of their status in the Brethren Court, with a *simpleton*?!"

The Pirate Lord of the Caspian Sea glared daggers at the younger man. "I am indeed a Pirate Lord, boy. The Pirate Lord of the Caspian Sea, Hector Barbossa. I've been so fer many years, you little brat. What would a whelp like ye know about what a Pirate Lord is?"

"Seeing as I'm the youngest Pirate Lord so far, I'd say I might know a bit more than you do." The cheeky youth responded before dismissing the monkey owner all together, muttering something under his breath about blood being thicker than rum before he focused on the men from Singapore. "Who are you?"

"I'm Tai Hung. These are my men." He replied much the same way he had not so long ago in the Locker, when the normal Jack Sparrow had asked him the very same thing. "I serve the highest bidder. Since you have a ship, that makes you the highest bidder."

"Is that so?" The teen asked with an arched eyebrow, looking them over before nodding decisively. "Now that we know each other - or rather now that I know *you* - let's get down to business. Do we have supplies or should we find some here?"

"I'm afraid we don't 'ave anythin', Capt'n. Not if we're to head fer Shipwreck Cove." Ever the dutiful first mate, Gibbs answered Jack's question immediately. "There should be a spring on the island and we can hunt down some grub, just enough to last us to the nearest port. Shouldn't take long."

Jack nodded, looking over the crew. "Very well. Mr Groves, please do take a handful of men with you to go for a hunt. Mr Gillete, I trust three men will be enough to find some drinking water." The two Lieutenants nodded, straightening their backs by habit when being given orders by a superior officer. "Mr Gibbs, I trust you can give me an adequate answer to my inquiry."

"Capt'n?"

"Do I still keep a big, black chest, locked in one of the secret compartments in my cabin?" The teen peered at the older man with trusting eyes but the first mate frowned in confusion.

"Not that I know of, Jack."

"I know of it." Barbossa threw in, leaning against said cabin's outer wall. "Broke the lock and rummaged through. Not much in there fer such a big chest."

Jack grinned and headed straight for the cabin. "That's the one! Will, do be a good man and see if I have any fishing rods in the chest on the far left. James, be a dear and try to identify the island we're on. Tia Dalma will help, I'm sure. Mr Gibbs! Give me a hand with this!"

"Aye, Capt'n!" Gibbs sent a warning glare at the crew before entering the cabin after his Captain, suspiciously eying the lot of Singapore men. Never trust a man from Singapore, an old saying went. The ever superstitious Gibbs was wary of the from day one.

James sighed and nodded to his fellow Navy men to go off and do their assigned duties before following after Turner, Sparrow, Gibbs and Barbossa into the great cabin, impressed by how uxorious it seemed. It looked more fit for an actual lord than it did for a pirate one. Then again, Sparrow had been all over the world so he *must* have plundered a lot in different countries. Some of the things Norrington could see at first glance were so exotic it stunned him by its mere presence aboard the ship. There was a grand table covered in maps of the Caribbean while one of the walls was occupied only by a very accurate hand drawn map of the entire world. James arched an eyebrow at some of the islands he had never heard of and wondered at the detail of the ones he knew by heart.

Tia Dalma came to stand at the table, riffling through the maps with a critic eye. James walked over to join her, keeping an eye on the three pirates and one blacksmith turned pirate on the room. Will soon enough found five fishing rods and Jack instructed him to hand them out and start fishing. The complaints that there was no bait were not heeded and Sparrow just shooed him along.

A few minutes later, Gibbs and Jack were hauling out a gigantic chest out of the great cabin, Barbossa watching in interest as Jack produced a key seemingly out of thin air and unlocked the chest. Unlike when Barbossa had opened it, it was *full to the brim*. Hector stared.

"Ya 'ave a magical chest?" His incredulous question drew the remaining crew's attention and they forgot about their assigned task to stare at their seemingly even more eccentric than they'd thought Captain unabashfully. Jack just grinned at them.

"Of course! A gift from a shogun that one time I went to Japan when I was sixteen. He was very nice. I don't think he realized that the Wicked Wench was a pirate ship." He patted a black railing before taking off his coat and hat, rolling up his sleeves so he can ruffle through his things. "Now, let's see what we've got here." He bent over and dove in. Gibbs rolled his eyes at the crew, took one fishing pole for himself and started on the ungrateful job of just sitting there and waiting for a fish to bite the hook without bait.

Half an hour later, Norrington and Tia Dalma exited the great cabin with a good idea of which island they were on and how many days of travel they had until the nearest port, about to share the relatively good news with the rest of the crew and the Captain, only to stop short at the sight that greeted them. Everyone save Gibbs and Jack were sitting on the deck of the Pearl, watching, as though hypnotized, as Jack rummaged through his things, unmoving and unblinking. The two exchanged looks when a strangled squeak escaped Will and an equally strangled groan came from one of the Singapore pirates before going over to see what the fuss was about. Almost as shameless as Sparrow was, Elizabeth took hold of both of their hands and tugged them both down to sit and look.

And enjoy the view of Sparrow's wiggling rear, high in the air, as the teen searched for something



still. The big chest obviously had many a hidden compartments that could only be opened with the right key and he was still busy searching for something. He wasn't even aware of his audience or the show his posterior was making. Tia Dalma grinned and leaned back to enjoy the show while James choked on his own spit. He had always thought Sparrow's coat ratty and too worn out to be worth the care Sparrow showed it. And yet he now realized its true purpose: the protection of innocent people and their sanity from the all too enticing sight of Jack Sparrow's perky bottom. James wasn't sure if an outright battle going on right next to the ship could have drawn his gaze away. The others certainly would have been useless. For goodness' sake, even *Barbossa* and his *monkey* were under the spell!

He was very glad his mouth had gone dry when a gurgling sound tried to escape him when Sparrow *wiggled* before finally straightening out, frowning at a beautiful dark red gown. A *familiar* - to some - dark red gown of some of the finest silk. The following reaction to the next words out of Sparrow's might have been deadly if they had had any less luck.

"This dress has new tears and caresses. Did someone manage to get me to wear it again?"

"Uh, no. I wore it," Elizabeth's voice sounded faraway even to her own ears. It would seem even ladies were interested in what Jack might have looked like in the dress. He certainly had the booty for it! And the waist. Dear god, he had a *narrow, thin waist*. It should be added to his list of crimes that he hid under his coat.

Jack sent her an incredulous look. "Whatever for?"

"Barbossa made me when I stayed on the Pearl the first time." The girl explained absently, observing the way Jack was holding the dress against his body. It would look great on him. Far better than it had on her, Swann was sure.

Jack sent a dirty look as he tucked his dress away, completely unaware of just what sort of imaginary he'd kindled in the men's minds. James and Will were as red as the dress and Sao Feng's men were grinning lecherously at the youth. Barbossa looked torn between contemplative and appreciative as he imagined it.

Needless to say, when Gillete and Groves returned with their groups a little later, they were expectedly confused by the way everyone was just sitting there and staring at Jack as he searched for something else, a few other odd items strewn about his feet and the big chest, a suddenly overprotective Gibbs staring down disapprovingly at the assembled men and two women. Any questioning on their part only got them dragged down to the deck and they *understood*.

Jack remained oblivious.

## Chapter 4

"Aha, I found it!" Jack crowed some twenty minutes later, clapping his hands in delight and drawing out an elegant, long black bow and an arrow quiver from the chest. He frowned thoughtfully at the black bow and arrows and pouted. "Why is everything I used to own black now?" He checked over the weapon, finding it in no worse a state. It was fairly well cared for, but, then again, it had been built well and needed only little tending to. "Do I even use it anymore?"

"You know the fine art of archery?" Gillete asked in a half-present voice, just now recovering from the tease show that Sparrow had unintentionally been giving them.

"Of course! Learned from natives when I was a little boy when my Da took me to meet my Mum's people." The pirate smiled sheepishly. "They said I had a knack for it." He took out an arrow, inspecting the sharpness of the tip and how straight the wood was. He obviously knew what he was doing, with how critically he was inspecting it. "Did we get enough supplies?"

"We got enough for two, maybe three days of sailing with good wind." Philip answered, snapping out of his daze a little faster than the rest. Then again, he, unlike the others, was not as fond of Sparrow or as involved with him. He was the only one not hesitant to hang Sparrow four years ago. He had no attachment to him whatsoever. His fellow officers ... Well, Theodor admired the pirate while James was pretty much obsessed with him.

"That won't be enough." James, duty calling, fought to resurface from under his strange waves of ... something that had all but drowned his brain due to the show Jack had been making without even being aware of it. "We'll need at least five days to reach the nearest port."

"And we can't waste any more time here," Jack pondered, turning away from the crew to nock an arrow experimentally. More than a few eyes fell on his backside again, drawn to it and awaiting any more delicious wiggling and swaying. The gentle rocking of the Black Pearl ensured the latter but Jack wasn't bent over the chest anymore. Still, it seemed distracting enough just to watch him balance on the deck with the movement of the waves.

"We won't make it with so little supplies!" Tai Hung protested, his own survival instincts taking over his lust, jumping to his feet with his men, but they all stopped short when Jack whirled around with six cocked arrows, expertly perfectly aimed at Tai Hung and the five men standing closest to him. They froze while the rest of the crew started bustling with activity, snapping out of their daze with wide eyes, not sure what was going on but Jack wasn't budging. "What is the meaning of this!?" The scared and outraged Singapore pirate demanded, looking at the arrowhead with almost crossed eyes.

"You're fired, is what it is." The young Pirate Lord answered coolly, his hands not wavering.

"Really, Sparrow?" The foreign pirate mocked. "A bow and arrow? Such obsolete weaponry? Do not mock us. And why should you fire us? We are the best men here. You won't be able to sail away without our help."

"Of course we will. This ship needs six men at best to sail away and I don't need traitors among my crew." He replied, drawing the arrows further, closer to his chest to better the killing speed if he were to release them.

"Traitors?" Alarmed, Elizabeth stood to her feet, reaching for her own weaponry, along with the other pirates, Navy men and Will. Soon enough, they had the men from Singapore surrounded in a

loose circle, all of them like targets in the center. If they so much as blinked wrong, one of the pirates was bound to open fire. Under such scrutiny, they won't be able to draw their weapons without dying first.

"Aye. They set off a signal known only to those in the East. Had I not met Liang Dao, I probably would have never known, but he's a good man. Taught me some of the most interesting things I know, like light signals, finding trap doors and Chinese. They're hailing a ship, one of theirs, no doubt." He narrowed his eyes just a little more, mouth set in a thin line of displeasure. "That signal can be seen a day's sail away. We need to get out of here. Besides, less mouths to feed, more food for us. And we can always find more crew the next time we make port."

"You won't last without us. We're not the only traitors here." Tai Hung said but raised his hands over his head in surrender when he was ordered to by Groves.

Jack gave him a bitter smile. "I know." He gestured with his head towards the railing. "Off you get. Nice and slow. *Oh*, do leave the weapons right here. You won't have need for it. Your mates will be here soon." He watched with alert, sharp eyes as they did as they were told, glaring at the teen every chance they got. He was unaffected by it and just arched an unimpressed eyebrow at them. He held them on target until they had all took a few steps away from the boat. "Wight anchor and set sail. Set course North-East, if you please, Mr Gibbs."

"Aye aye, Captain!" Said old sailor barked the orders at the remaining crew, watching them scramble to do as they were told. Jack remained where he was, standing on the railing, keeping the glaring and cursing men in his sight, never lowering his bow and arrows, keeping them as his targets until the Black Pearl sailed out of the little cove. Then, he finally put them down and released a tired sigh.

"You okay, Capt'in?" He looked down to see Marty frowning up at him as he carried some cannonballs to the other side of the ship. The little man was one of the very few who had sailed through hell with Sparrow, even if the Captain didn't know that quite yet, and he was fond of him. He was as worried as Gibbs had been when the man had been acting strange before they learned it was because Davy Jones had sent the Kraken after him. It was a relief to have the man back, after having lost him, even if it was not the Captain he was used to. But surely, no matter the age, Captain Jack Sparrow was still Captain Jack Sparrow, right? Right. He seemed even better off now than he had before the whole Kraken business, and yet there was a ... cloud of something like sadness around the teen. Marty had noticed it only now, but he realized it had been there since they first laid eyes on the de-aged pirate. The little dwarf was a lot more perceptive than most would give him credit for. He wondered if anyone else had seen it and if they had, would anyone do anything about it? Capt'in deserved it, for sure, since he had the habit of offhandedly helping everyone who was sulking in his presence.

Jack smiled at his short crew mate and bobbed his head, something like a mask falling into place. He couldn't show a weakness in front of his crew, especially if they knew him only through some great feats he'd done in the future. Besides, he doubted they'd understand. He'd rather not hear their fumbling comforts since he can well do without them. "I'm fine. Just ... Well, first day on the job and already preventing mutinies? A bit over the top, don't you think?" He winked and jumped off the railing, putting the arrows back into their quiver before putting it and the bow back into his chest. He swiftly put everything back into it, his hands lingering on the soft fabric of the dark red gown before it, too, was put back and the chest was closed and locked. The key once again seemed to disappear into its hiding place and Sparrow turned to survey his crew.

They seemed like decent enough sailors and good men, even though it might sound strange to say something like that about a group of pirates. Well, Jack knew that pirates weren't necessarily all

bad folk, having met all sorts of pirates and being a rather unique sort himself, but it was rare to find a honestly loyal crew, or so he'd heard. And experienced. He shook away the thoughts of a long lost time, looking away from Norrington - who was helping Will and Mr Cotton with the sails - as he did. It was no use thinking about it. It had happened a long time ago. They had been kids who would rather survive to see their thirties than actually live. It was a wonder they had stayed with him as long as they had and he tried hard not to think about from where he might know James and who *else* he was related to. He wouldn't hold it against the man that someone who shares his blood had betrayed him. It was bad form.

He heard a whisper in his ear and smiled as he scaled up the rigging. He knew people were unnerved when they saw him talking seemingly to himself when he was conversing with his beloved ship. Even when she had not been his, exactly, she had spoken to him. She used to be shy yet now she was strong and proud and bold and *fearless*. Not that she'd ever been a coward, but she was wearing that fearlessness like a cape now. She whispered in his ears adventures the likes of which had him sitting in the crow's-nest, captivated even as he watched the horizon. He stroked the wood beneath his fingers and mourned the blackness that met him. His hand once used to match the color of her beautiful wood, like it was as much a part of her as her yardarm was. Yet, even as he no longer looked like a living part of her, he felt her so deeply in his soul, their essences intertwined so that not even hands of fate could separate them. His Wicked Wench, nay, his *Black Pearl*. His crew might have changed but she never will. Not so much as to not be his anymore.

"Capt'n!" He looked up - well, *down* - at the call, waiting to see what Mr Gibbs wanted. "Miss Dalma says a storm be in our course. What should we do, Capt'n?"

Jack thought about it while he slid down the rope that would usually hoist the jolly rodger, but he didn't let the rope take him, instead using his hands and legs to slide *down* the rope. When he landed, he found that most of the crew were watching him expectantly, even his fellow scowling Pirate Lord. "Any idea how long it might last?"

The question was directed to the voodoo witch, so Tia Dalma just shrugged. "A few hours. It be headin' West, so it will move outta our way soon enough."

Sparrow looked towards the slowly setting sun. In just two hours, two and a half, the orange-ish orb would disappear beyond the horizon and it would be dangerous to sail into a storm with so few a people manning a ship as big as the Black Pearl. Not to mention that if anyone were to fall overboard during the storm, they wouldn't be able to see or properly hear them over it. It would be poor captaining to just go straight into it if he knew that he could avoid it. He didn't know these men, not the current him at least, but they were loyal to him and they looked to *him*, even when he was apparently twenty years younger than their usual Captain Jack Sparrow, for directions even with Barbossa, a currently much more experienced Captain, just a few feet away.

It was an easy decision to make, all things considered. Easy as the last decision he'd made with his crew in mind, if not as life-changing.

"Anchor. Pull up the sails. We'll stay the night here and in the morning will continue our journey. It will give us some time to rest and we've made good time already." He nodded at his men, turning around to help on instinct with the sails. He'd been a real Captain for only a month and was still too used to helping sail his bonny ship to stop himself at times.

"What about the ship that is following us?" Elizabeth asked even as she and the rest of the crew followed the orders, helping the fast ship slow down and come to a stop. It took a but longer for such a fast ship to safely weight anchor but that got them a mile or so more of their journey and away from their would be hunters.

"They wouldn't have arrived yet, if what Captain Sparrow says is true." Theodor offered as he helped hoist the mainsails, Raggeti, Pintel, Marty and Jack already climbing the rigging so they can tie them up. Gibbs and Gillete were helping with the hind ones while James tied them up, Will mimicking him on the front sails that were hoisted up by Barbossa and Mr Cotton. Tia Dalma had disappeared into the galley to start on dinner for the crew, so Elizabeth tied off the helm so the wheel won't spin and accidentally set them off course, even though the ship has already come to a stop and won't be moving any time soon. But she had seen Jack insisting on it in the past and she wanted to make herself useful. It felt like everyone was doing something to contribute to this except her. She was not good at cooking or stitching sails, being a Governor's daughter and born in a rich family with servants weighting on her every whim. For all that she'd learned about sailing over the past few years, she could still not do all the tasks men did on a ship. Had someone not climbed up to tie up the sails, she would have gladly taken their place. "We probably will still have a good head start if we continue with first light."

"Of course we will!" Jack called from high above, grinning at them from his high perch, already having finished his part and a bit of Raggeti's and Marty's. He looked completely comfortable just crouching there like his namesake, elbows on his knees, hands hanging between his legs. Despite his precarious position, he acted as though not even a hurricane would be able to knock him off of the mainmast. "My ship is the fastest ship to sail these seas! Even with a little delay, we'll be a good number of miles in front of them. They won't even be able to see us."

"See? Nothin' ta worry about, Miss Elizabeth." Gibbs smiled at the young woman before continuing with his work. In half an hour, the Black Pearl was ready to wait out the storm, her crew enjoying the food Tia Dalma had prepared for them, each crew member telling Jack stories about what they'd seen or done before the Pearl and ever since they joined her crew. Will told the story of his father, still half expecting some recognition to cross the teen's face, knowing Jack and Bill had been extremely close before the mutiny. His father, during his stay on the Flying Dutchman, had had only fond and good memories to speak of when Jack Sparrow's name was brought up in conversation, having considered the young Captain like a brother.

Yet Jack could only wistfully think about it as he heard the adventures being told - some corrected with the Pearl's whisper in his ear - adventures *he'd* led these people on but could not remember. His beloved ship offered to tell it all to him, to remind him of who he had become, but he gently refused her. Tia Dalma no doubt had her own agenda if she had left her little shack in the swamp to come and get Jack out of the Locker, but whatever it was, Jack knew one thing for certain. Tia was infinitely fond of him, almost like a mother would be. Considering his first visits to her had been when he had been six years younger than he was now, it was to be expected. He'd been a skinny, short boy, not at all having the makings of a pirate in build and appearance, but she had said he would one day do great things and often said he had been touched by the gods - or goddesses, to be precise. Jack hadn't questioned her back then but he had soon learned what she might have meant.

Barbossa surprised them all by plainly informing Jack that he had once been his first mate and that he had led a mutiny against him. He explained how they had marooned him with one pistol and one shot as his only companions before sailing away on his ship to search for the cursed treasure of Cortez, only to be cursed for ten years. Seeing that the story of how they met Jack was intertwined with Barbossa's story of how Jack had exacted his revenge, the five from Port Royal told their part of the story as well, before Gibbs and Marty threw in theirs. The easy air of their meal evaporated faster than a mist as Jack's face, open and smiling just moment ago, closed off and Tia Dalma glared daggers of death at them as he excused himself.

"Wot do ya t'ink yer doin'?" I erased him memories so 'e can recover!" She practically glowered at them, looking particularly pissed with Barbossa. At least they had stopped after Jack was rescued from Port Royal and given a day's head start instead of continuing all the way to his fate at the

Kraken's jaw and tentacles. "If ya continue doin' dis, de Jack Sparrow ye've all come ta know will never be back. Da spell will wear off but 'e'll never trust an'one ag'in." She also stood up and stormed off the deck, trying to get Jack to let her into his cabin but failing.

With one last glare at the responsible group, she left the deck entirely, leaving them to wallow in their guilt.

## Chapter 5

The little 'party' they'd been having on the deck was soon cleared up, everyone uneasy as they made their way to their hammocks. It took a few people a bit of time before Morpheus managed to drag them into his land of dreams, but soon enough, as the gently rocking of the Pearl lulled even the most restless of the crew, the ship fell completely silent.

And James Norrington was utterly unnerved by it. This was far from the first time he'd had to sleep on a ship, what with his and his father's occupation, and he'd never felt so completely awake during a night on a ship, even as he was swaying in his hammock between Groves and Marty, Gillete on Theodor's other side, Gibbs on Marty's, closest to the stairs towards the upper decks. He didn't even feel uncomfortable with being on this particular ship - a *pirate* ship - or surrounded with these men - Tia Dalma and Elizabeth had quarters of their own so as to not tempt the men - who were *pirates*, as he'd been here before, done it for quite a number of nights before he'd ran off on Isla Cruces and this very ship was dragged to the deep by the Kraken. He'd slept like a babe during the sail across the sea on the other side, for God's sake! Why was he having such difficulty now?

It was really simple. Guilt. He felt guilty. James felt unspeakable guilt every time he looked at Sparrow now. Jack was but a child still in many a societies' books, two years away from being considered an adult. It *hurt* something in Norrington's chest when he looked at him and saw *innocence* of all things surrounding the pirate, although the teen had shown he more than knew how to take care of himself and was already a Pirate Lord. James still didn't know what that meant and was supposed to include, but it was apparently very important among pirates and it was beyond impressive that an *eighteen year old boy* had managed to achieve it so young. Still, Sparrow was a child and he had just learned that he had been betrayed by a good number of people he was sailing with at the moment, some time in the past. Could he even sleep at all? Would Tia Dalma's spell truly wear off and Jack Sparrow would become a bitter pirate who truly cared for no other than himself?

It would be a great shame, that. James wasn't one to often praise a pirate, but Jack Sparrow was an exception to many rules. He knew the mad pirate was a good man, one that avoided pointless fights with sharp words of parlay and was often called a coward for it, when he was, in fact, trying to preserve his crew and all of their lives. And his ship. By God, that man was truly *in love* with his Pearl. Norrington could see it especially now. The Captain he'd come to know had obviously learned not to so expressively show his affection for his vessel, but this teen hadn't. Not yet. James was actually starting to believe his claims that the ship was talking to him.

He blamed it on the sun and the near death experiences he'd gone through in the last couple of weeks.

Still, he could not explain how Jack knew that Cotton was mute before he was told, that Barbossa liked green apples over red and he left said green apples for the older pirate during dinner, how he patted Gibbs on the back every time he mournfully looked at his empty rum cask before distracting him by asking for more stories, how he told 'the two love birds' to stop ogling each other and just make up, how he teased James about not smelling funny anymore. No one had told Jack about any of that and he was too young to know about Joshamee's drinking problem. And even though he knew Elizabeth and Will loved each other, they currently weren't showing any signs of their ongoing quarrel. How did he know?

James growled at himself. These were not thought that could help him go to sleep. If anything, everything regarding Sparrow always had the completely opposite effect. Even long before he'd

indirectly caused the Captain's death, and even before the sinking of his Dauntless, the then Commodore had often found himself wondering about Jack Sparrow and what drove a man like him. People generally knew he was unpredictable in his goals and the ways he achieved said goals. Still, James had wondered, spending many a sleepless nights just staring up at the wooden ceiling of his quarters on the Dauntless, pondering the pirate, what had made him the way he was and why such an obviously well educated individual would plunder when he could make an honest living.

And yes, James *had* figured out early on that, despite of how he acted like a common scalawag and drunkard, Sparrow was indeed far smarter and far more educated than people would give him credit for. The man spoke several languages, could read and write and apparently read a lot, seeing as he would at times mutter complaints at this or that philosopher when he was in the brig or the dungeon and thought no one was there to hear. He sometimes even unconsciously seemed to quote famous authors of various literature when he was answering someone he was not interested in talking with. And he obviously knew every crook and cranny of a ship, if he had managed to jam the Dauntless' helm chain mill to stop her from sailing after the Interceptor, whom he also sailed with only one more set of hands to help. James would have needed three at the very least.

And that was not even mentioning the more complicated words Sparrow knew, as he had demonstrated, most notable being right before he fell off of Fort Charls' walls. He seemed to be a born politician as well, a negotiator born with a silver tongue seemingly gifted to him by the gods themselves. The pirate, all things considered, was indeed *savvy*.

But why would he turn to piracy in the first place? Somehow, Norrington doubted even Gibbs knew. And it certainly wasn't simply for the gold! James had overheard Turner talking with Elizabeth once, about when he and Jack had went in a rowboat to try and save her when Barbossa and his men thought it was her blood they needed. He had answered Elizabeth's teasing that he would make a fine pirate by telling her Jack had said as much himself, especially since he was obsessed with treasure and 'not all treasure is in silver and gold', making Elizabeth flush when she realized his meaning. Very savvy indeed, Mr Turner. Not to mention that it would have been a right opportune moment had James not been passing by and seen and overheard them.

*'I wonder what is his treasure that he's obsessed about? Besides the Pearl, that is,'* Norrington found himself thinking before rolling his eyes at his own train of thought. The Admiral - was he even still an Admiral anymore? - sighed and sat up, carefully extracting himself from his hammock, taking his coat and boots with him as silently as he could. There would be no sleep for him this night, it would seem. *'Maybe some fresh air will help?'*

And so he found himself climbing onto the main deck, looking up at the clear sky, odd since there should be a storm just a few miles away, if Lady Dalma was to be believed. It was a full moon to boot, so it was a very beautiful night to just lie around and stargaze, the breeze gentle and warm, unlike the winds in the Pacific or South China Sea. And don't get him started on the chill that crept into your very bones as you head more and more south from that point. At least the journey had produced good results. Good-ish, really, seeing as Sparrow had to be returned to his teenage self just so he can be his normal - or what passed for normal with Sparrow - self.

It was eerily quiet on the ship, not even a watch had been set up. Then again, all the lights had been killed so no ship that might be passing by could see them and they were far enough away from the island they had left the Singapore pirates on to not worry about them just yet. They all deserved some rest after the stressful time they've all had as of recently, and let's not even go into the past year, since Jack's death. Not even Norrington had had it easy once he returned to the Navy and it wasn't just because they were hunting every bloody pirate ship in the world.

James' back went rigid as a soft tinkling sound just barely sounded over the wind, looking around



for its source. The decks were all empty, no one out here, not even Barbossa's annoying undead monkey pet. The wind picked up a little and the sound was back, once again barely audible but undoubtedly *there*. And coming from above. Norrington looked up sharply, at the folded sails, up the yardarm, but he saw nothing. The sound persisted yet, as the wind played with Norrington's still long hair - he had grown fond of it, even if it had been very annoying and impractical to always put pins in his hair so it doesn't show under the stuffy wig he had to wear as Admiral.

There. The crows-nest. That must be where the sound was coming from and James could only think of one person who could be making the tinkling noise. Without much thought, he found himself scaling the rigging until he was up in the crows-nest and found himself for the second time in twenty four hours staring into wide, startled big black eyes of a teenage Jack Sparrow. The more surprising thing was, however, the tear tracks trailing down his cheeks, one or two on each cheek, a little smugged khol trailing as well.

James Norrington was dumbfounded to have discovered Jack Sparrow crying in the crows-nest.

He felt sort of panicked. He'd never had to console a crying person before. "A-are you alright?" If that wasn't the most awkward question to ask in such a situation, the Admiral wasn't sure what was. Still, he had to make an effort. Child, his mind kept repeating over and over again. This was not Jack Sparrow of legend but a child. And children had to be helped.

Jack just rubbed away the remainders of his tears and scooted over a little, so James could get in and not hang so dangerously at night. The older man did and sat awfully close to the upset pirate, as there was not much room up here. It was meant for one person, really. The wind was stronger up here, but the nest mostly protected them from it. Only a more persistent breeze reached them, whipping their hair around and making Jack's trinkets tinkle again.

"M fine. I just had a nightmare." He sounded like such a child in that moment that James automatically wound an arm around him, startling the teen.

"A ... a memory?" He ventured a guess, guilty. Had they upset him enough that he could not even sleep? His arm tightened around the smaller body and was surprised when Jack cuddled himself up to him, as if seeking warmth. Then again, he was only in his thin shirt up here and for who knows how long already before James gave up his fight against insomnia.

"Aye, a memory. A recent one. Well, recent for *me*. I guess twenty years have passed, since then." Jack answered, listening to the older man's heart with his ear on his chest. It was a little faster than normal but Jack didn't comment, as his own was hammering away in his chest. Partially still from the nightmare. Partially ... from other things.

"Do you, um ... Want to talk about it?" He wasn't sure if this was how it was supposed to go, as he was currently bullshitting as he went. He'd truly never seen anyone comforting a person after a nightmare. Not even his own mother! His father had thought it pathetic for a boy to go crying to his mother because of something as silly as a nightmare, no matter how realistic or scary it had been. He hoped he wasn't making it worse.

"Not really, but I heard it helps." Sparrow mumbled with a shaky sigh, letting out the last of his tears through that one motion. His eyes didn't sting again. "I dreamed of the day Armando died."

"Armando?" That was a completely unfamiliar name. He'd never heard of a pirate named Armando in correlation to Sparrow and his crazy adventures. Said teen grinned shakily.

"Aye, Armando. A fine Spaniard captain of the Navy. We were ... really close, when I was fifteen." A shuddering breath escaped the Captain and he seemed lost in his memories of a better time. "He

didn't know I was a pirate back then, although I wouldn't have even called myself a pirate in those days. I've been just a cabin boy on the Wicked Wench and he had just started out on his own ship, pretty thing it was. Not nearly as my lass, but a pretty ship none the less." He patted the black wood and Norrington rolled his eyes. The man truly *was* absolutely obsessed with his ship. And maybe a little bit in love.

He just wasn't sure if that was a worry, pity or admiration worthy thing.

"Anyway, I met him one day when I was floating in the middle of the Atlantic - a story for another time, that." He warned before the Navy man could question him. "Spent a few months with him on his ship - too big for my taste, too slow, but seeing which ship has stolen my heart, it is to be expected - got to know the crew. It was great. But then Captain Morgan finally tracked me down and Armado ordered open fire on the Wench. I was aghast and asked why he was attacking when the Wench hadn't even hoisted the jolly rodger as a warning of an attack and he said it was a famous pirate ship that must rot on the bottom of the ocean, her crew all to be left to the sharks. No quarter, no prisoners, no mercy. That was the first time he told me he was a pirate hunter, that he hated pirates and wanted to kill every last one. And so I ran. Knocked him out when he was about to order for the first volley and jumped ship. The Wench threw me a line and they dragged me back aboard and we fled. Captain Morgan kept a close eye on me for two years before we encountered Armando again and he had become bitter and even more merciless. I won't go into detail, but the day I became Captain of the Wicked Wench was the day I had to lead Armando to his death in order to save the life of my crew and my own. Captain Morgan had left them in my care. I couldn't just ... But it hurt!" Jack hit helplessly against the Admiral's chest, like a child who was saying the world wasn't fair. "It still hurts. I can still see it, the look on his face when he realized what I did. Shock, sorrow, anger, betrayal, rage, regret, even pride. But he didn't look at me with hatred. Why didn't he hate me?" He moaned, burying his face in the older man's jacket and did his best not to cry again.

James didn't know what to do, so he just put his other arm around Sparrow, tucking him in against his body and started rocking with the ship. He felt incredibly awkward like this but it seemed to startle Sparrow into stillness, which allowed him to get a few words in. "You said you were close ... Maybe he loved you too much to ever hate you? Maybe you just never realized how much he cared for you? Maybe he realized he couldn't make you into something you are not?"

Jack just laughed bitterly. "Aye, he loved me. I always knew. Everyone did. He was rather obvious about it." That shocked Norrington into silence and he just stared at the top of Sparrow's wild hair. Did that mean ... ? "I could have asked the world from him and he would have given it to me, damned be the crown. But he hated pirates more than he loved me, it would seem."

"Why do I not believe you are telling the whole truth here?"

"Why should I? The Pearl isn't exactly all that fond of you, but she is usually grumpy against anyone who steals even a minuscule amount of my attention away from her. And I don't even know what I'm going to do." He moaned as if in pain, a hand reached out for black wood again. Had James not been leaning against the side of the crows-nest, he would have completely missed the minute shiver that seemed to travel through the whole ship.

His eyes widened and he looked at Sparrow in shock, but the Captain was too busy bemoaning the ship's fate. And what a surprising fate that was.

"Look at all this ash, coating her forever black, even without the paint. Who could set her on fire? Who would burn down a beauty like her? My Wicked Wench, my Black Pearl."

"Ashes? Fire? Burn!?" The startled Navy man finally managed to drag Jack attention away from

the sooth colored wood. "What makes you even think something like that happened? And how can she still be here if someone set fire to her?" He sat up straight, still holding the teen, looking uncertainly at the boards under his feet and the yardarm.

Jack's shrug in his arms drew his attention back to the pirate. "She told me, whispered about a great fire burning us both. Something about a hundred souls and freedom and Davy Jones. Tia Dalma said I sold my soul for her to float again, so I'd say magic. And before you say something along the lines of me listening to imaginary voices in my head," James found it strange how practices that interruption sounded and wondered just how many times Jack had had to utter it before. "Just look at this black color. Tell me, have you seen paint like this before? Have you seen a ship this fast? She's faster now than she used to be. I can tell very easily. And she turns and maneuvers more easily, as though a lot of her wight had disappeared. The structural weight of her had burned but magic transformed her from my Wicked Wench into this fine lady of mine, the Black Pearl. She's still the same ship but not. I can tell it's her but her appearance has changed. She's become even more beautiful, if you ask me, and I had thought that impossible. But she's also become better."

"How do you love her so? As though she were a person?"

"Ain't she?" James found it strange that Sparrow's voice was suddenly so much fainter. He shifted back to lean against the hold of the crows-nest and arched an eyebrow when he looked down and found a dozing teen. He rolled his eyes heavenwards, muttered a curse against crazy pirates before settling down himself. No use getting a cramp from sitting in one position for too long.

He was out like a light not fifteen minutes later, lulled to sleep by the rocking of the great ship, the heat and the steady breathing of his companion.

## Chapter 6

Norrington woke up to laughter and clash of swords and some whistles of appreciation coming down from the deck as he blearily blinked his eyes open and tried to figure out just why the bloody hell he had fallen asleep in the crow's nest. He sat up slowly and rolled his shoulders and neck, having gotten a cramp despite his best efforts as this was not exactly the most ideal of places to sleep. A quick sound of parrying swords finally made him look down and he arched an eyebrow at what it was that he was seeing.

Jack Sparrow, still aged eighteen, seems to have awakened at least a few hours earlier, judging by how focused he was, was currently crossing blades with an equally awake Will Turner, laughing and taunting the blacksmith as he easily parried and avoided and returned every lung Will tried to make, going from the defensive to the offensive faster than the eye could recognize the difference. Which was odd in itself. While not exactly a sloppy fighter, Jack wasn't exactly on par with Will due to his slighter stature and lack of proper form.

Or rather, Sparrow had never fought anyone seriously enough for anyone to actually know if he could fight properly or not. Even on Isla Cruces, in their three way duel, Sparrow had mostly been trying to get the key and had not made any serious attacks on either James or Will, who had thought themselves superior swordsmen since they could keep their form no matter the insanity that was going on around them. Jack had just left them to it and had gone after the key, content to let the two pursuers of Elizabeth's hand and affections duke it out.

Watching him now, it was obvious he wasn't nearly as bad as his fights so far had suggested. His form was as fluid as water, swift in change as the wind and every move was as sharp as his cutlass. He had been holding out on them all, judging by the rest of the crew's interest and confusion. He had the greater sea legs between himself and Will and whereas Will stumbled with a wave, Jack danced with it, shifting from hip to hip, like some fey creature hovering above the deck. His slight frame hid a secret strength, too, it would seem, as Will, a sailor and a blacksmith used to putting all of his weight and muscle into a task, could not make him give any ground.

Sparrow was toying with him like his namesake might be toying with a bigger, less maneuverable bird. Mocking and taunting before darting out of reach or getting too close and tripping William up as though he were a mere rookie. James was impressed. He had taught Turner and he knew Will to be as fine a swordsman as he was a smith, but this eighteen year old boy was so easily outmaneuvering him that had he not been Captain Jack Sparrow, it would have been embarrassing.

The Admiral easily climbed down from the mainmast, noticing that they were already moving and putting even more distance between themselves and where they have left Sao Feng's men, the sails almost magically catching all of the wind and hogging it for themselves. Nobody noticed where he had come from when he joined the rest of the observers, just in time to see Will frustratingly try to chop Jack's head off, only for the pirate to bend backwards while his hand snapped out, sword catching Will's outstretched arm with the flat of his blade - a potentially deadly cut, if he were to use the sharp end of the blade - and pushing it away. Unbalanced from his unwise move with that simple counter, Will stumbled and nearly fell to the deck, his arms making cartwheels to keep on his feet. Sparrow had straightened and, laughing, hit him on the ass with the flat of his blade, sending him tumbling a few steps forwards until he caught himself on the railing.

"Come on, Will! Don't look like a fool in front of your lass!" Turner growled and with a scowl, went in for another parry of blows while the others just watched.

"I had thought him better trained," Barbossa grunted, pointing with his head at William, who nearly

cut his own finger off when Jack met his blade in such a way that it twisted their swords dangerous close to their hands. "He looked that way so far."

"I thought so, too." James was not at all impressed. Will had ended up being not as half a good swordsman as he had thought. Or it might just be Sparrow. Very possible, that.

"He should be, seeing who trained him." Gillete sniffed, offended on his commander's part. Groves was too busy watching the fight to comment at all.

"He might be, but Jack be trained better." Gibbs threw in, watching with a grin as Will lunged for Jack, only for the Pirate Lord to jump back onto the railing with a spin that nearly flattened Will to the deck since he had extended a booted leg out for a kick. "Had to be, after his father saw the trouble 'e kept gettin' in to. His further lifestyle kind of jus' trained 'im further. Jack just prefers not to fight, if 'e can help it."

"We've noticed," Elizabeth said absently, watching the two men duel. She was still learning, after all, and Jack seemed to have some good tricks that weren't considered dirty.

"Come now, whelp. You're embarrassing yourself. You must keep a level head in a battle or, just like that," he demonstrated by finally knocking the sword out of Will's hand with a twist of his own, leveling the tip of his sword with Will's throat. "You could be dead."

"Where did you learn that move?" Turner asked, interested despite himself. He had seen only Norringotn do that move before and he said he had been taught it by someone else. How would a pirate who met James twenty years after the boy's current age know such a move?

Jack grinned. "Picked it up from an old friend - or ex friend - Fitzy. Fine swordsman, he was. Wonder what happened to him. Haven't seen him since I was twelve and he betrayed me by giving me over to the Royal Navy so they could use me against my Da. Shame they didn't know Da wouldn't take that too well." He grimaced, almost like a wince of sympathy.

James had zeroed in on only one part of that whole explanation. "*Fitzzy*? That ... that wouldn't happen to be short for a longer name like ... *Fitzwiliam*, would it?"

Jack just nodded cheerily, obviously knowing full well just who James was. He had figured it out as soon as he realized who he resembled so much. "Yep. Fitzwiliam P. Dalton III. Not a bad pirate for a fake pirate." He grinned at Norrington. "Your cousin ever tell you about the Barnacle?"

"My cousin was never a pirate!"

"Sure he was. He was a pirate and a scalawag and he was a right dirty liar." Jack insisted, walking up to Norrington and leaning into his face with a glare on his face. "Or would a spy be a better word? A mole? A snooper? An undercover agent?"

"My cousin was a Navy intelligence officer." James hissed in the teen's face, a glower in his voice. They both marveled that just last night, they had fairly been cuddling and now they were all but at each other's throats, glaring daggers.

"That's the same thing, Mr Norrington."

"That's *Admiral* Norrington to you, *pirate*." Somehow, both titles were spat out and Jack arched an eyebrow at him, considering. He shook his head and leaned away.

"You sound just like him. Just like your father." Norrington's back went rigid and his glare intensified on Sparrow, who wasn't fazed at all. He looked almost sad. "Do you hate pirates as

much, I wonder?"

"Don't change the subject." Glowered the ex Commodore. Jack just stepped further away and James was struck by a sense of loss that had no place in his heart. Why should he care if Jack no longer wanted to be all cozy like last night?

"I'm not. I want to know what makes you think being called a pirate necessarily means an insult. Fitz sure didn't think so. He didn't exactly take it as a compliment but he had had fun sailing with a pirate's son. Is it so hard to believe someone can be a good person and a pirate?"

Unknowingly, Jack had stumbled upon a very sore topic for the Commodore. It was that very question that had once cost him everything, his career, his standing, his ship, his men, his life. What he hated the most was that he could still not determine if Jack Sparrow was indeed a good man as well as a pirate.

Seeing the turmoil on James' face, Jack turned around and walked away, heading for his cabin without another word. There was a thick silence and only Gibbs and Tia Dalma dared sigh in exasperation, something along lines of '*Teenagers*,' uttered like an oath under their breath. Norringotn just climbed back up the mainmast and settled back into the crow's nest, trying his hardest to ignore the shivers and groans of the Black Pearl, working on convincing himself that he hadn't noticed as hard as he was trying to assure himself that he didn't care if the sudden camaraderie between him and Sparrow had been shattered once more. And by his own doing, once again.

"Pintel?"

"Hm?"

"Wot was dat?"

"If I didn' know no better, I'd say a lover's spat."

"Not *another* one!"

Barbossa took great pleasure in walloping them both over the head.

00000

James climbed down back to the deck only at noon, when he saw that everyone but Sparrow had went below deck to get away from the heat and eat something, the helm tied to hold their current course while the Captain of the Black Pearl was sitting on the railing of the quarterdeck, a fishing pole in hand, a bucket full of fishes and another set beside it for his future catches, humming some tune and occasionally looking at his Compass, his gaze drifting onto the horizon in the direction it showed before closing it and focusing on the task at hand, only to repeat the process again only minutes later.

James felt almost guilty for approaching him now, as he looked almost peaceful. His legs were swinging over the side of the ship and he was obviously enjoying the sun. He showed no signs that his nightmare had happened at all. James, for a second, doubted he had maybe dreamed up the whole thing and had just sleepwalked up to the crow's nest if not for the beaming smile Jack had sent him before he had gone and put his foot in his mouth this morning.

But he had to speak with Jack. He had thought over their conversation this morning and the thought had occurred to him that he didn't know how Fitzwiliam and Jack had met and what their story was. But Jack had implied that Fitzwiliam had pretended to be his friend only to betray him in the

end by giving him over to, no doubt, James' own father. He remembered a time when he was not allowed to now where his cousin was and eh did remember his father once catching some pirate boy to get to another pirate. It would have never occurred to him that that might have been Jack.

He needed to clear the air between them up before it became awkward, but he wasn't sure how to start. He had never before realized just how awkward he was in conversation and society in general when he wasn't giving or receiving orders until he actually started trying to make an effort. And with Jack of all people! The older version would no doubt have laugh if he remembered all of this when he turned back to normal, eventually. Still, that was no excuse not to apologize to this Jack for how he had treated him and right after Sparrow had opened up to him last night.

Now, if only he knew what to say ...

"You don't have to say anything." Jack said as soon as Norrington was within hearing distance, looking at him over his shoulder with a bitter little smile. "You're not the first person to react to me like that because of how I was born and raised. You even have the excuse of being raised to react like that yourself, what with what a jerk your Da was. No offense intended, but he *is*."

"To say otherwise would be a grave lie," he replied wryly and was pleased when the smile became a little less bitter and a bit more amused. "And I wish to apologize for my behavior and how it had come out. I *could* make the excuse and say that it was habit or the way of my upbringing, but I don't want to insult you with a weak excuse like that. I guess I was just ... angry. I used to look up to my cousin as a boy, but he never had time for me, especially after he returned from that mission. He was always training, saying things like 'I *can't* believe he beat me', 'I need to get better to beat him the next time' and 'When had he gotten so *good*?' I felt neglected and I guess all those emotions just resurfaced at the worse possible moment. I'm sorry I snapped at you."

"It's okay. I'm sorry, too, for provoking you further." He twisted his upper body so he was half facing the Admiral, one hand extended for a shake. "Are we square?" He sounded a little hopeful, which only charmed James further and he reached out to shake the dark, beringed hand.

"I believe we are."

"Good!" As if his cheer had summoned a fish, Jack felt a violent tug on the line, almost toppling him overboard had James not still been holding onto him. "Whoa, that's a big one!" He shook off James grasping hand when he regained his balance and took the pole with both hands while Norrington, panicking he might topple over anyway, took hold of his waist. It was a good thing he did, as another hard tug dragged them both closer to the railing. Jack turned his head so he was facing the older man, their noses almost touching, and grinned from ear to ear. James laughed as they felt another tug and tugged back together, fighting a fish that was surely big enough to be the crew's dinner tonight. "On three?"

"Three!" And they tugged, fighting with the fish for a good two minutes before it tired a little and they took their chance. They struggled a little until Jack was on solid ground - so to speak - before, with their joined strength, they managed to pull a big black drum, the wiggling fish trying to break free and return to the sea. The two males laughed as they watched it flop on the deck, alerting the crew that something was up and they ran up to see, only to gawk at the large fish, almost as big as Jack's whole chest.

"That's what I call a fish!"

"That's what I call a feast!" Gibbs crowed, going over to take the fish, weighting it. "I'd say this beauty 'as some ninety to hundred pounds. Capt'n. Commodore. Nice catch." The two mentioned just grinned at each other as they stood up.

"Don't forget the other bucket, Mr Gibbs!" Jack called after him as he went to take the fish away into the kitchen. Needless to say, yesterday's fishing crew looked awed at the number of fish caught without a single piece of bait on the hook. Seeing the looks they were giving him, the Caribbean Pirate Lord winked at them. "Just need a gentle touch, luv."

"I swear you're some fey creature, Sparrow." Babrossa grumbled and Jack just laughed at him. The older captain scowled but said nothing as he was tossed a green apple. If he didn't know any better, he'd say Sparrow was trying to butter him up. Well, he already had Jack the monkey's vote, seeing as the little primate was clambering all over him and chattering excitedly. Very strange, seeing as Jack and Jack never got along.

"I might be. My Mum's origins are a bit shaky, you know." Sparrow teased as he followed after his first mate with the rest of his catch. "I hope there's some grub left for the Captain!"

"I think Cotton ate it all."

"Arrrrg! Walk the plank! Walk the plank!"

"This is a mad ship." Gillete breathed and Groves just laughed. James couldn't help but agree more. No one ever said madness was a bad thing, though.



## Chapter 7

They sailed two entire days with good winds, strong currents and a swell mood, in utter peace, before it all finally caught up to them in the form of a ship with yellow sails and a pirate flag, speeding towards the Black Pearl with clear intent of a raid. Neither Barbossa nor Jack were happy about that and soon enough, their own colors were floating in the air.

Babrossa was even less happy when he realized it were the Caribbean's and not the Caspian's colors.

Still, with so little crew on board, Jack knew they couldn't take the other pirate ship in on a fight and it was directly on their course. To try to evade it now would put them days behind schedule and while food was no problem, the air was as dry as the desert so they could not replenish their water supplies with rain. And there were no safe islands to make a stop at anywhere nearby, either.

So they had no choice. Jack ordered for the 'parlay flag' to be hoisted next to his colors and watched the agreeing flag join the black jolly roger of the other ship. Not long after, the two ships were standing side by side and the Pearl's crew got a good look at the other ship and its own crew.

The captain was an Irishman in his early forties, neither notably ugly nor good looking. He was, in other words, plain. Not someone you'd remember the next day. However, he was dressed in some finery that seems to have come from a recent plunder, so it was little wonder that he had felt brave enough to attack a ship with black sails under the Caribbean Pirate Lord's flag. Then again, Jack had been dead for a year and everyone knew it. He must have thought him to be a pretender or something.

They've not spoken a word and Jack already didn't like him. He was arrogant and stuck up, thinking he had the right to accost other pirate ships and not answer to the Code for breaking it. He was obviously an opportunist if he was using the panic and chaos this Beckett was causing to prey on fellow pirates who were desperately trying to flee towards Shipwreck Cove, where he will no doubt later go himself to seek protection. Well, not on Jack's watch.

Especially not after he saw the man spit on his deck. Oh, Jack was going to make him clean that up with his very own beard.

He walked confidently, arrogantly, superiorly onto the legendary black ship, head lifted high, sneering down his nose at the ragtag crew that greeted him, his men following his example, although they leered at Elizabeth and Tia Dalma, both of whom had been given sufficient weaponry. His steel gray eyes slid over each face before settling on the two obvious captains and he arched an eyebrow.

"Who be the captain of this fine boat?"

Jack bristled underneath but he only smiled his most charming and disarming smile at the redhead, gaining his full attention. "That's be me, good sir! And may I know who stands on my deck?"

"Captain Finch, is what you may call me." He said as he sauntered over to the younger Pirate Lord, peering down at him with obvious ... interest. Oh, Jack was going to have *fun* with this one. His pointer finger twitched, the ring there a burning presence in his mind. "You're awfully young, pretty. How have you come to be Capitan of this boat?"

"I'd appreciate it if you'd stop addressing my *ship* as a *boat*, good sir." The teen said coyly,

sashaying over to the Irish pirate in the very walk that would become his signature later in life. It made his hips sway enticingly and it drew Finch's attention elsewhere. Oh, Sparrow was the smarter bird, indeed. "And how I came to be Captain matters not in your intentions aboard this fine vessel. Which are, what, exactly?"

"I be looking for a little bit of plunder, my pretty," he replied with what he must have thought was a seductive grin as he bowed and took Jack's hand to kiss it. Hector was glaring at Finch, as were most of the crew, since Finch could very well be Jack's father as he were now. "Surely we can come to an ... agreement that would benefit us both?"

The leer in his voice was too obvious. Jack pretended not to notice.

"Oh, but what if we wish *not* to make deals with you, Mr Finch? For *surely* such a rude approach deserves no courteous reception on our end and yet we have accepted you aboard without firing a single shot." He stepped closer when Finch's eyes narrowed, tempting him with his proximity and his warm breath on the taller, older captain's lips. "It is wondrous how a few gentle spoken words could get you so much ... *Captain*." He darted away before Finch could snag his arms around him and drag him close, yet stayed enticingly, teasingly close. "What do you think would ... *satisfy* me, captain? Do you think you can provide it?" A leisurely fake once over had the older pirate practically flushing with lust. Hm, teasing this one was almost no fun at all, Jack thought with an internal pout. He reacted too easily. Jack quite literally could get him wrapped around his little finger with just a batting of his eyelashes. Armando was much more fun to tease.

Jack bet James would be, too, if Jack were so inclined to try it. Maybe at a later date?

"And," Jack continued, animatedly waving around with his left hand, the rings glinting in the sun. "What would satisfy *you*?" It was practically a purr and the Irishman was all but salivating by this point, looking at Jack with eyes as hungry as a starved beast who had just spotted easy, vulnerable prey. Jack darted away just out of reach when Finch tried to get a hold of him.

Said man growled. "You staying still, fer a start."

"Ah, but must I? Would it really *please* you if I were ... unmoving?" He was stalking his prey now, circling the captain, staying teasingly out of sight. And while out of sight, he concentrated on the pretty amethyst golden ring on his pointer finger of his left hand, making the Irish crew, one by one, drop their weapons. Slow and steady wins the race. No need to make anyone suspicious. "Bound, perhaps? Gagged? Or do you like it the other way around?"

"What is Jack doing?!" Elizabeth hissed in Joshamee's ear as they all watched, half entranced and half scandalized by their young friend's and Captain's behavior. Oh, they've all seen Jack being seductive at one point or another, whether the man was consciously trying or not. But never this ... provocative, bold. Forward. Never using so much and so little innuendos at the same time. "He can't just go around acting like that!"

"Quiet, lass. Don't break his concentration or else we're all screwed." Gibbs hissed right back, having recognized the glazed looks on the other pirate's faces and in their eyes. Jack was using the ring. He almost never used the ring, being all about freedom. But Gibbs could see the necessity in using it when there were so few of them. It would be a blood bath and the Pearl may just sink yet again.

"What do you mean?" Will asked, having overheard the hushed conversation, leaning closer to the old sailor.

"Dere be powerful magic at work and Witty Jack must focus." They nearly jumped out of their

skins when Tia Dalma answered, staring with interest at the men slowly losing their will. "Da ring will do its job. Jus' stay quiet fer once."

Elizabeth looked affronted but only replied with a huff before turning back to watch the show. It was like watching a shipwreck. You just can't look away, no matter how horrific the scene became. And the sight before them was most definitely far more appealing than a wrecked ship. Jack was like a mermaid, seducing his prey on to the waiting, deadly rocks to sink his ship and kill his men. And Finch was as captivated as any man under a mermaid's spell.

"What's it gonna be, luv?" Jack asked as he reached out with a bejeweled hand, tracing the Irishman's stubbled jawline. "Will you surrender?" Finch blinked in bemusement at the wording but his eyes went wide when he felt the cold sting of a metal barrel from a pistol pressed under his chin, having not noticed Jack moving his other hand at all. "Or do I have to make you?"

"What do you think ye're doing?" The older captain snapped, expecting to hear the sound of his men drawing and cocking their weapons, yet there came no sound like it behind him. He dared chance a glance over his shoulder and was dumbfounded to see them all just staring blankly into space, eyes glazed and all weaponry on the deck, being swiftly picked up by James, Theodor and Philip while Marty was pickpocketing them all after they were cleared of all weaponry. He looked back at the enticing young creature to snarl at him when he felt something ... something a lot like a velvety mist ... just ... wrap around his consciousness. All anger, fear, indignation, wounded pride, whatever other emotion he might have felt at that very moment kind of just ... It all disappeared. He was floating on air and he never wanted to land on his feet again. He was being bewitched, a small part of his mind was yelling but it was so, so far away that he could barely hear it. He didn't want to. The mist was so comforting ...

Jack almost sighed in relief when the last of the Irish captain's mind fell asleep, the man now fully under his control. It was hard, to make it subtle, to make a person's will subtly allow itself to be submitted. His Da had never bothered to make it subtle. At least his Da's ring was still on his finger and working just fine. Jack wasn't sure if the ring had limitless amounts of power or if it could be used to a certain extent. One of the reasons he never used it unless he just *had* to. Like that one time when he had to sneak up onto that one English warship that had captured a mermaid- A story for another time. He had business to attend to. Like reminding these miscreants that the Code was the *law* and that Pirate Lords are enforcers of the Code in their domain unless the attention of the Keeper was required. Sea goddess help them if they get the Keeper's attention. Jack actually winced in sympathy.

"Right, then. Let's have you lot all going back to your ship now. You can give us all of your loot and half of your provisions. I do believe that that will be enough to make up for delaying us so and causing so much trouble to *two* Pirate Lords." Sparrow said to the brainwashed men, already going casually over the plank, climbing onto the other ship as though he owned it. Seeing as he had the rest of the crew under his hold within a minute, he practically did. He just sat on one of the crates of cannonballs and watched as box after box of goods and bag after bag of booty was transferred onto his ship. He then had their weapons also mostly brought onto the Pearl, not knowing whether they'll need additional powder but it never hurt to be safe rather than sorry. It was far too easy. But it was taking a lot of time for what he wanted to be brought aboard his Pearl with only one plank. The Singapore ship might have been catching up on them, taking advantage of the good wind to make good time. "James!"

Said man looked up from where he was organizing the new cargo, completely uncaring that this was a form of piracy while Philip looked half disgusted and half resigned with the situation, Theodor happy to see what pirate life was really like first hand to really think about the law for the moment. Norrington cocked an eyebrow when a dark hand beckoned him over but he went, leaving

it to Barbossa to finish the procession of booty while he talked to the younger Pirate Lord. "You called?" He drawled, taking in how different Jack was now than he had been during his little seduction act for the greedy Irishman. It was a relief to see Jack back to his normal self. That act had been ... Well. James certainly didn't have the words to describe what it had been.

Sparrow, unaware of his companion's internal thoughts, just bobbed his head. "I need you to watch over these blokes, call me if they start to slip back. Tie them up as soon as the last crate is carried across." He jumped off of the crate he had been resting on and started walking away. "I have some business to attend to. I'll show him for calling my lass a *boat*."

"Where are you going?" James called after him even as he kept a sharp eye on the enemy pirates. It was obvious Sparrow was up to something and Norrington would rather like to know what so he can be prepared for the eventual chaos that usually follows in such situations. It will give him time to prepare, at least. And hopefully he won't be as surprised.

Jack turned around enough to wink at the Admiral before continuing his way bellow deck, not bothering to answer. James waited stoically where he was posted until the last of the goods were put on the Black Pearl before calling over a few of the crew to help him tie the opposing pirates up. They were still thankfully under whatever spell controlled them so it went without a hitch. By the time they were done, the ship gave a large lurch, almost sending them to the deck as she suddenly started moving. James looked up to see that Jack had returned from bellow deck and was scaling the rigging from one sail to the other, releasing them to catch wind and the anchor had been raised by two crewmen that must have stayed bellow since James hadn't seen them until just then. He quickly tied them up as well before ordering everyone back to the Pearl. He shouted for the Captain, but Jack did not sling back over to his ship until the other vessel hadn't almost completely cleared the Pearl.

A few moments later, the cursing of their would be raiders could be heard carried on the wind as the other ship sailed away and the Black Pearl's own sails caught wind to continue their journey, her Captain at the helm, whistling innocently when they, realizing a ship can't sail by itself, turned to stare at him.

"Sparrow, what did you do?" Norrington demanded in his best authoritative voice as he glared at the smiling teen, watching him suspiciously. Groves and Gillete had moved to flank him by habit while Gibbs stood warily at his Captain's side, unsure of just in how much trouble the Caribbean Pirate Lord was. The rest of the crew were just watching the proceedings like it was a particularly interesting theater drama. James did not appreciate the thought and glared death at them, but no one moved. He gave up on them and turned an expectant - demanding - gaze at the Captain instead.

Jack cocked his head to the side and grinned mischievously. "Oh, nothing, nothing. Nothing at all. Just, you know, the standard. Jammed their helm's chain mill, is all. Poor bastards were set on a one way trip towards our friends from Singapore." He glared behind himself at the slowly disappearing ship. "Hmph! That's what he gets for calling *my* ship a boat. How rude of him."

"Jack, isn't that unnecessarily cruel?" Will called in a strange tone of voice, drawing a pair of suspicious green eyes to him. What *was* Turner up to?

"It was very necessary, dear William. And cruelty is only a matter of perspective." Jack waved him off, taking out his Compass and adjusting their course before putting it away. "They will provide a sufficient distraction for our not-friends and give us more time to get away. And we do need that time. We seem to be constantly delayed."

"I still think that wasn't quite so necessary." He insisted and the Pirate Lord snorted.

"Then you're more naive than I first thought. Did you seriously think I'd give your buddies time to catch up? I don't know how well you know me, but I usually tend to try avoiding having my ship placed in danger." Stunned silence met his words as everyone turned to stare at Will, jaws hitting the deck or eyes narrowed so impossibly that they could hardly see through the glare. William just stared at Jack, dumbfounded at having been caught. Sparrow gave him a sharp, humorless smile. "What? You thought I wouldn't catch on? Don't be so naive, Mr Turner. I've seen once a friend's betrayal and you don't have the benefit of my trust like he had. I saw through your act. Not too shabby, but not all that impressive either. Besides! You should learn not to share your plans with others, especially not gossiping pirates like those from Singapore. Too bad they didn't know I speak Mandarin. Too bad you don't speak it, either. They wouldn't have given you the ship, mate. They'd have just killed you after some guy Beckett came to pick me up."

James had his sword as quickly as Barbossa did, two bright pairs of eyes glaring at Turner from two different sides, swords pointing at him with deadly intent. No one came to the blacksmith's defense. Not even Tia Dalma, who had been so fond of him from the beginning. Not even Elizabeth, who loved him.

"Traitor!" James accused, the grip on the handle of his sword almost bruising, his rage almost palpable. He knew very little about Sao Feng but he knew the man could be a merciless pig. No one from the Black Pearl would have survived his taking over.

"Ya filthy bilge rat, I should have ya keelhaulked fer treason!" Barbossa spat, itching to run the young man through. He had been getting on Barbossa's nerves all year long and he would gladly take the chance to do it now. "An' after all 'e did fer your ungrateful self. Ye should be ashamed, young Master Turner. Bootstrap must be spinning in his watery grave. Or his sea-fashioned clothes on the Dutchman."

Turner glared right back, eyes flashing at the mention of his twice cursed father, drawing his own sword, altering his point from the Navy man to the old pirate. "Like either of *you* has any right to throw these accusations around. *You*," he pointed at Hector, the word spat out like venom. "Mutinied against Jack and marooned him, *twice* and *you*," he rounded on Norrington, letting their swords crash together, steel on steel. "You took Devy Jones' heart from him and ran when you *knew* he desperately needed it. If anyone here is a traitor, it is the two of you."

"I at least haven't been playing his friend back then. My thoughts on the matter were always perfectly clear, Mr Turner." James' words were ice and the watching group shivered at the coldness of the atmosphere despite the warm rays of sunshine washing over them with the Caribbean's heat. "And I didn't try to use his vulnerable state to further my own goals *or* give him over to a man that would gladly see him dead. And that applies to either Beckett or Sao Feng."

"Not ta mention that ye're not exactly entirely innocent in this matter either, Mr Turner. Ye left him concussed on Isla del Muerta with the crew that mutinied and left 'im t' die. Not exactly somethin' a good, loyal friend would do, aye?" Will winced at the accurate accusation. Gibbs looked ready to throttle the boy, now that he realized why Jack 'fell behind'.

"I say we keelhaul 'im!"

"Arrrgh! Deep-six! Arrrrgh! Deep-six! Deep-six!"

"Stab 'im an' make 'im walk th' plank!"

"No, gents. We should deal with him how all thieves and traitors among pirates are dealt with." Hector practically purred the words, stepping closer. "I'm sure a few cut fingers, tongue and ear will do jus' fine." His grin was grim and nasty. "Or we could give him a 'Bootstrap' burial at sea.

We do have a spare cannon." Turner's eyes were as wide with fear as Elizabeth's were, neither of them having seen a pirate punishment in person but having heard it described in high detail, they were both reasonably terrified.

A shot rang out through the air, making them all flinch before looking up to where their Captain was still at the helm, a gun pointed heavenwards and a scary glint in his black eyes. The ship was silent.

"There will be *no* keelhauling, deep-sixing, cutting, disemboweling, dismembering, lashing or any other sort of punishment on *my* ship other than being locked up in the brig, *savvy*?" That single word had never been filled with so much malice before. Pintel and Ragetti both stepped back and Elizabeth looked unsure of her position on the Pearl all of a sudden.

The Caspian Pirate Lord glared at his Caribbean counterpart. "Then it be good that this be *my* ship, ain't it, Sparrow. I get t' do whatever I want on me own ship."

"Ah, except she's not yours. She's mine. Always has been." Jack countered, lovingly caressing the wheel as he pointedly reloaded his pistol and put it back in its place on his sash. Barbosa scoffed.

"Ye don't have any proof of yer claim, Sparrow. I commandeered 'er, so the Pearl be mine, fair and square."

"Except I do," Jack replied happily and a hand disappeared into his coat, pulling out an envelope made of fine leather and taking out some *very* official looking forms out of it. He handed them to a curious Theodor, who looked them over with an equally intrigued Philip. "And you really shouldn't be exclaiming that so loudly, mate. It is against the Code to fire upon or steal from fellow pirates out at sea. The prison cells in the Cove aren't exactly a place you want to spend your last moments in."

"Ye'd know all 'bout that, wouldn't ye, Jack?" The other mocked before demanding of the two officers to know what was written on the papers.

"It's ownership documents. For the Wicked Wench and the Black Pearl." Groves explained, still looking over the papers in astonishment because who would have thought pirates even cared about these things! "They're addressed to, chronologically, Captain Morgan, Captain Jack Sparrow, Cutler Beckett and then Captain Jack Sparrow again, although these last ones haven't been processed, the turning of ownership. Then the last one is for the Black Pearl, addressed to Captain Jack Sparrow." He looked up at said pirate with an amazed smile. "In the eyes of the law, the ship is his."

"In de eyes of de sea, as well. Him soul be bound ta 'er's." Tia Dalma added with a sharp grin of her own.

"And in the eyes of the Code. Don't forget the Code." Jack reminded cheerfully, taking the papers back from the Lieutenant. He stashed them back to their hiding place and walked back to the helm. "Now, since we've established who's the Captain of this ship, we might as well get back to the matter at hand. Normally, I would put dear William in the brig until we make port and then let him run free, but we don't have that option with so little of us aboard. So Will will be given a guard to watch him at all times and he will work jobs that won't interfere with our speed. Once we make port, I will decide whether he's allow back on board after we've seen if we could procure a few more men for the crew. Until then, he is still a part of this crew and I will not tolerate any roughhousing, manhandling or any other form of abuse. Anyone who breaks these simple rules will be scrubbing the deck, even at night, and will get only half of their food rations. Did I make myself perfectly clear?"

"Crystal," James grumbled but sheathed his sword, Barbossa grudgingly following with a grunt. The dangerous edge disappeared from Jack's eyes - since when had it even been there? - and he nodded in satisfaction.

"Good. Back to your stations, men. We have two more days of sail ahead of us!" He grinned when all he got in answer was "Aye, aye, Captain!"

## Chapter 8

Later that night found the crew eating their meal in silence, their Captain absent as he steered the ship and enjoyed the night skies alone, content to have a smaller dinner later. The atmosphere was more than a little awkward as the men and two women looked around at each other, their eyes more than once straying to the three men that were in the foulest of moods since noon. One was glaring daggers at a solemn, resigned younger man, who was in turn glaring at a black dressed pirate, the oldest of the three, who was somewhere between brooding and as close to a dignified tantrum as one could get. Green, brown and blue eyes alternatively clashed between the three, making the tension ten times worse every single time it happened and the three males all but growled at each other like rival animals over food or territory.

It was getting slightly ridiculous but no one dared speak up regarding it. Still, the tension was killing them all and Elizabeth Swann, a Governor's pirate-story-loving daughter, has had enough.

"I've never seen Jack act like he did today." She said as an offering, eying the only two people who knew said pirate at this age. Gibbs sent her a reproachful look but Tia Dalma just laughed, putting down her plate of stew to look teasingly at the younger woman.

"Dat be b'cause Witty Jack changed. 'E no longer wears him heart on him sleeve. Our Captain no longer shows him true self, instead 'e hides be'ind a mask. A mask so well made dat even dose who knew he as a lad forget 'ow 'e used ta be." The voodoo witch said with a chuckle, gesturing around at the group. "Ya be all right privileged ta see dis Jack Sparra back. Dis be him true self. Dis be Jack Sparra, too sharp ta fit in amon' normal pirates, b'fore 'e made him mask, so smooth, so decievin'. Ya can see him wit, him smarts, him heart. Dat all be gone in jus' a few years, hidden. Hidden better dan any treasure in de sea. Witty Jack even needed a reminder wot it be like ta be himself."

"Just a few years? Even before the mutiny?" Elizabeth asked, interested. What did she mean by Jack's true self and that even Jack needed to be reminded of it? Why would he forget? Why would he hide behind a mask.

Tia Dalma seemed to be reading the questions right out of her thoughts. "Aye, not long b'fore the mutiny. Him ship, him love, was set afire before him very eyes. On Lord Cutler Beckett's order." James had suddenly went rigid, staring at the dark woman with a scary intensity. He recalled Jack saying that no paint could be so deep or that color like black ashes and sooth on the wood of his Black Pearl. He recalled how he had reacted, curling up in on himself, like a wounded animal. "B'fore dat, Witty Jack once lost him Wicked Wench. Was swept away in de arms of da sea and resurfaced near Shipwreck Island, where the Brethren were meetin' regardin' som'one who were breakin' da Code in de far East. Him ship were attacked and commandeered by the EITC, him crew killed, da Wench becomin' a Company ship. Meanwhile, Witty Jack learned a close friend were doin' somethin' awful, first thinkin' 'im innocent but den bein' kidnapped right out o' da Cove, branded a traitor by the Brethren an' bein' left ta die at sea. But da sea love Jack Sparra an' 'e survived. 'Avin' no other home, 'e turned ta privateerin'. Met Beckett dat way an' got him Wench back. Sailed like dat fer five years, transportin' all sorts of cargo, but never slaves, like Beckett 'ad first wanted. No matter how good de pay, Witty Jack refused. Den, one day, Beckett asked of 'im ta find a secret treasure dat Jack refused to give up da location o'. So Beckett made 'im a deal. A punishment Jack couldn't've refused. 'E 'ad ta haul one hundred slaves, jus' dat once, an' Beckett would sell 'im him Wicked Wench fer a shilling."

The room was waiting with bathed breath for the woman to continue, but she just leisurely took a



few spoonfuls of her stew, content to make them squirm for the continuation of the story.

"And? What happened then?" Groves was the first to give in and ask, leaning forward as though that would reveal more details about the story and his favorite pirate. Seriously, in Lieutenant Theodor Groves' eyes, pirate Captain Jack Sparrow was practically a celebrity, a legend. A few of the other officers used to tease him about it, back in Port Royal, and James and Philip were thoroughly exasperated with him regarding his almost fanboying about the eccentric pirate. Elizabeth, although more secretly and with a lot more reserve, was much the same until she had met him in person. Although, even now, after she had seen that he was as mortal as her, as flawed and as human as everyone else, she at times felt that same childish awe when she saw him do something that should be impossible. The others were just curious to learn more about their secretive Captain, although Gibbs looked highly uncomfortable.

"Witty Jack accepted. Ya saw 'im papers, didn't ya, boy?" Theodor nodded and Tia Dalma smiled bitterly. "Any other pirate would've been content, would've done it an' earned 'imself a ship fer a shilling. But Witty Jack couldn't. So 'e freed da slaves and tried ta run, but Beckett be expectin' dat. Five ships 'ave been followin' da Wench an' dey captured Jack, took 'im ta one, where Beckett be waitin'. He branded Jack a pirate and made 'im watch da Wicked Wench burn. But Witty Jack not let it be so. 'E jumped in after 'er an' tried ta save 'er. Neatly burned wiff her, he did. So, bein' a Pirate Lord, 'e summoned Davy Jones, somethin' no other would dare do an' 'e sold him soul t' 'im. Sold him soul ta see her floatin' again. Da Devil knew o' Jack Sparra, knew 'im well, knew him skills. Da Flying Dutchman can already sail anywhere de captain wants, so imagine da terror of a pilot like Jack Sparra at da helm would make. Nothin' would ever be unreachable ta Davy Jones with someone as kissed by da gods as Witty Jack be. It be too good a deal to miss."

They could already tell where this story was going. It wasn't surprising at all, to learn why it had to be a *hundred* souls to replace Jack's. Irony was cruel. They were not at all surprised Jack had chosen freedom over safety.

"So Davy Jones made a deal 'e never made b'fore and brought back da Wicked Wench. Only she be forever black, now. No magic could return 'er to her previous colors. Dat suited Witty Jack jus' fine. It be like turnin' a new leaf. He now forever be a pirate so he now had a *pirate* ship. He bought black sails and named him beloved da Black Pearl and da reat ya know." The voodoo witch finished her food before she spoke again. "'E lost trust in men after dat. Lost it even more after da mutiny. 'T all started when 'e was twelve but da mask finally were complete after 'e survived. An' da mask be so unflatterin', if ya ask Tia." She sighed through her nose, looking towards the stairs leading to the deck. "'E be so bright and witty, it were a great surprise da first time I 'eard 'im talkin' like 'e does now. He hides him heart, pretendin' not ta care. I hate it. I so loved dat spirited, open, optimistic boy he once were."

"So you thought that *this*," Philip vaguely pointed upwards where their subject of conversation was no doubt at the helm still, indicating the spell in his meaning, the de-aging. "Could help bring him back to his old self?"

The African like beauty tsked. "Tia may mourn da loss of dis Jack, but Tia also be fond of Witty Jack as he is. B'sides, we need Witty Jack. Dis Jack be sad, sorrowful. It be too soon since-

"Miss Dalma," Gibbs sharply cut in, sending her a glare he usually would not dare make at her even if he were to stand right behind Jack in a suit of armor and two giant shields on either side. The voodoo witch was as surprised his this bout of bravery from the extremely superstitious man as the rest of them, bit she only arched an eyebrow at him. "I don't believe th' Capt'n would bee too happy if ye said too much, beggin' your pardon, of course. 'Specially not about such a delicate topic." He pointedly looked around the curious group before meeting her eyes again. "Especially if

ya want him t' recover."

"Ya be right, Joshamee Gibbs." She acknowledged after a pause, nodding to him to enforce it. It also sent a clear message to the rest that she won't be saying anything else on the topic. "Dis be Witty Jack's story ta tell, but not now." And that right there was a *very* clear warning. Elizabeth pouted. Groves might have done the same.

James was quiet.

"You said Jack was '*swept away in the arms of the sea*', earlier. What did you mean by that?" Will surprised everyone with the guts to actually speak up after his betrayal was revealed just a few hours ago. "And where did he get that ring? Where did he get that Compass, for that matter? You said you had given it to him but it feels like you're both leaving something out." Turner said, eying her suspiciously and ignoring the green eyed glare sent his way.

Gibbs glared harder. "That also be th' Capt'n's personal business. None of ye should be much bothered by it." Using that as his dismissal, the old sailor finished what was left of his stew, thanked Tia Dalma for the meal and left for the upper deck, taking a plate of food with him for Jack. When he was gone, everyone once again turned to Tia Dalma, waiting for her to answer but James stopped her before she could say anything else.

"I do believe Mr Gibbs is quite right. We've already intruded on Sparrow's privacy enough. There is no more need to continue doing so. Have I made myself clear?" He added when he saw that his more subtle reproach would not be heeded, his hand casually coming to rest on his sword. There was a lot of grumbling, a few weary glances and groans of disappointment, but no one asked any more questions and their meal ended quick enough, everyone going back to their hammocks after a few games of cards. Gibbs joined them soon afterwards, going to his own hammock and not saying a word to anyone. He started snoring a few minutes later.

Norrington was relieved that the ship wasn't so eerily quite like it had been the last time he couldn't fall into sleep. It wasn't nearly as unsettling. Besides Gibbs snores, he could register the sound of Marty's especially swaying hammock, Raggeti's mutterings under his breath in his sleep and Pintel's snorts. Barbossa, who had opted to stay in one of the smaller cabins, could be heard walking around every now and then with his heavy gate and James wondered briefly what he was up to before that noise disappeared. Mr Cotton's parrot was producing some strange muted noise that sounded a lot like its muffled 'Arrrgh's and said parrot's owner was making a whistling noise with every breath. James shuddered to think as to why that was, seeing as what it was that Mr Cotton lacked. Gillete and Groves were always the most quiet sleepers James had ever met so the Admiral was not at all surprised that his men were not to be heard at all.

Once again, James found himself wondering about what he had learned on this day. Jack Sparrow not only had a magical Compass that pointed towards whatever you wanted most in the world, but he also had a magical ring that could brainwash people into doing whatever he wanted them to and he so very rarely used it that no rumors or stories had ever mentioned it. He had learned that Jack Sparrow had once tried to sail like an honest - or semi-honest - sailor before he was all but forced into piracy because he freed a hundred slaves. He was crazier than he had apparently thought him to be, if he was willing to jump onto a burning ship in hopes of saving it, but that also proved he was more loyal than most people would think him possible.

And the most shocking thing that came almost as no shock at all after you got to know the man a little, the Jack Sparrow he presented to the world was nothing but a mask to hide the *true* Jack Sparrow. The image he had made of himself made him unpredictable - and he truly was - and hid his true intelligence behind liquor and debauchery and greed and silliness. The true Jack Sparrow

had been showing through in the teen they were currently sailing under because he had not yet perfected a mask, an image he would present to the world. Oh, all of Jack Sparrow's characteristics were true, don't get me wrong! They are! But James had realized in just these couple of days that they were all ... overemphasized. Overwhelmed. Overdone. Outlandish. Caricatured. To know the real Jack Sparrow, you had to know how much his characteristics were overblown out of proportions in comparison to the true characteristics. But Jack never gave hints as to how much he was selfish and how much selfless, how much brilliant and how much mad, how much sarcastic and how much very blunt. It was a challenge, an enigma one had to spend a very long time working on in order to have any clue. Until then, one could be manipulated in a thousand different ways by the pirate, sometimes without even realizing it. Not a fate James was looking forward to.

But Jack had opened up to him once already. Perhaps James won't have to spend his *whole* life trying to figure it out. That night had been ... different, what with the starry skies and the full moon and whispered conversations high above from where others might disturb. Jack had been a pleasant warm wight in his arms. Norrington had felt like he was doing the right thing again, like that day when he had let Sparrow escape the gallows. Chasing after him had never felt as nice, nor had becoming Admiral. It had felt like he had a purpose again.

He almost wished they could have a repeat of the night. It had felt intimate and James had known so few intimacies in his life. But he would not be selfish. Sparrow had been awake because he had had nightmares. Nightmares of the death of someone who had at one point been very dear to him. And James hated himself for wondering if Jack would cry for him. Why would he? James had betrayed him! And he knew that now, too, thanks to bloody Will Turner. There was no way Jack would ever again smile at James the way he had the morning after their little conversation in the dead of the night. He would never seek out James' company again.

"James?" Said man very nearly fell out of his hammock at the low, quiet call and a dreadlocked head appearing above him very suddenly, having been so lost in thought that he had no idea Jack had descended from the deck to the crew sleeping quarters. "You awake, mate?"

"I, yes, I am." Norrington replied as he tried to calm his frantically beating heart. "Don't do that again. You scared the bloody hell out of me."

He could just barely make out Jack frowning a little guiltily, but he also saw the teen biting his lip to stop himself from giggling. "Sorry. Didn't mean to scare you. Or wake you. Just wanted to see if you were awake."

"And as you can see, I am." The Admiral replied in a deadpan voice and cherished the childish smile that stole over Sparrow's lips. "Did you need anything?"

"Hm? Oh, no. I was just ... I was just wondering if you were awake."

"Yes, I guessed that, but why?"

Jack fidgeted and resolutely did not meet the older man's eyes. "I wanted to see if you would like ... to stargaze and maybe talk, like the other night. The sky is still very beautiful. So many stars. We could compare our astronomy! See who's taught better, pirates or British Navy," he added the last with glee and James smiled as he sat up, silently answering Sparrow's inquiry by pulling on his boots.

"I highly doubt you register as an average pirate, Jack. Not with the friends you keep."

"Voodoo's got very little to do with astronomy." Jack pointed out and James just shook his head with a chuckle.

"And your mother's native tribe?" He asked as he silently followed the teen up onto the deck. "The one who taught you archery?"

"Nope. They were more ... Warrior oriented than in academics. Although they had some great mathematics." He winked at James conspiratorially when he swiped Will's boots and hid them behind Raggeti's. The Navy officer just shook his head with a chuckle. When Jack turned away, he took them with him and hid them behind one of the barrels holding fresh apples before joining Sparrow up at the helm. Shame they couldn't go up into the crow's nest again but someone needed to pilot the ship. "Me Da taught me about stars and navigation, though. I wonder if he's still around, now."

"If he's anything like you, he probably is." James offered as they both looked up at the starry sky. "Should you like to start?"

"Gladly." A dark, beringed hand immediately pointed towards the brightest star in the heavens. "Polaris."

"Oh, please. Are you mocking me? Even we Navy men can find Polaris." James sniffed, insulted. Jack just laughed and then continued to point three constellations around the North Star before grinning at Norrington in challenge.

"Can you continue?" It was asked mock innocently and the ex Commodore's eyes narrowed.

Challenge accepted.

Jack seemed awfully gleeful about that. And smug. As though James would let himself be beaten by an eighteen year old pirate!

Oh, it was *on*.

## Chapter 9

They made port in a small Danish town, Danish only in conception but actually being a freeman's port, mostly known by pirates and privateers and almost never visited by any 'respectable' folk. Finding a crew wouldn't be hard here but that was also why they had to be extremely careful as to whom they let aboard. They most definitely didn't need any mutineers so close to finally setting off for the Shipwreck Cove.

They had no problem making port at the little harbor, although plenty of people had gathered to see the black ship with its unusually black sails, excited and wondrous murmurs greeting the ears of the crew. Seeing as how their Captain was standing at the top of the mainmast and looking over the town from his higher ground while the wind dramatically whipped his hair, coat and sash about, it was no surprise that there was a lot of squealing and laughing children there, pointing with their dirty little fingers while their faces were stretched in awed smiles and their eyes twinkling with curiosity and wonder. When the Captain finally set foot on land some time later, they clamored around him, tugging at his coat, his hands, his pant legs and asking questions a mile a minute.

It was quite a sight, watching Jack indulge them, even placing a toddler on his shoulders and letting two girls hang off of his arms, showing off his quite well hidden strength. The kids oohed and aahed and cheered when he started telling them stories, his animated gestures more than appreciated by his young audience. The adults and teens, though, were more stunned by his looks and age than by the impossible adventures he was retelling. It was quite a surprise to see such a young Captain on such a magnificent ship as the Black Pearl. It must have been as strange the first time around, when the sails had still been white, the hull brown and lined with gold, when Jack had genuinely been eighteen years old and the new Captain of the Wicked Wench. Except now, his crew could marvel at how strange it was while his old crew had gotten used to it a long time ago. They *had* first known Jack as a midship man, one of the crew, not her Captain.

When the ship was well secured and Mr Cotton, Tia Dalma and Gillete were left to guard it while the rest got more supplies and tried to hire more crew, they followed Jack as he made his way right into the most popular tavern in the little harbor town, strutting in like he owned the place and little street urchin following him in, trying to imitate his gait and giggling as they did so. Some of the crew tried - unsuccessfully - to smother their grins and smirks, but Sparrow's walk had drawn quite a bit of attention to the pretty teen, greedy eyes on him as he made his way to the bar, got himself a drink and looked around. Seeing all eyes on him even as his crew moved to join and surround him - for all that he was Captain Jack Sparrow, he was currently the youngest one here and so they thought they had to protect him; a habitual reaction towards the young, more than anything else - he smirked into his rum, calculating. They needed provisions and smaller ports had suspicious folk lurking about, paranoid almost. They won't give them a good price for whatever they want to buy unless he gets them to trust them, or at least *him* as this group's Captain. And no experienced sailor would want to serve under someone so much younger than them. All the men here were almost twice Jack's - current - age and had grim expressions set on their faces.

He surveyed the room, taking each face in and cataloging them in his mind, pondering their usefulness on a ship and whether they had a single trustworthy bone in their bodies. Groups were out of the question. That was practically *asking* for a mutiny. Two to three ex crew mates tops. No more. Maybe a female pirate, if there was one in the port. But he needed laid back men, not some power hungry idiots who will try to cut his throat in his sleep. He needed able bodied sailors with experience, although a few youngsters might not be all that bad, either. More enthusiastic, wanting to prove themselves hands to quicken the pace. He won't be looking for a cabin boy or a pilot. Between himself, Mr Cotton, Mr Gibbs, Barbossa and the Navy boys, they had more than enough.

But he needed a few more gunners and deck hands. It will make the overall sail much easier.

His eyes settled on a large table where he could hear five different languages yelling over each other, their speakers seventeen men in the middle of preparing what looked like a drinking game. The men were all dressed completely differently and were all obviously from different ships or ports, none of them particularly familiar with each other but seeming to get along fine when there were bets, fun and drink. He saw a single chair left unoccupied at the table and his brilliant mind started wiring in contemplation. He saw lemons and salt beside a couple of big, big glass bottles of amber liquid and Jack smiled, excitement pouring off of him in waves. He took his tankard with himself as he boldly sashayed across the room, making way straight for the table, startling the men when he, so young in comparison to the rest of them, sat down to join them.

"*Hola, amigos*. Mind if I join in on your fine wager?" He asked, not seeing one man's in a corner head snapping up at the sound of his voice, punctuating his point by throwing down a half open pouch of golden coins they'd stolen from Captain Finch and his crew a couple of days ago. He grinned as their eyes bulged with greed at all that glittering gold and was satisfied to see them seizing him up, as though trying to gauge his years, his weight, his drinking experience and the likely round he will get hammered enough to fall out of the game. Jack let them do their little stare thing and pointedly took a long swig from his rum, watching their eyes light up. So they thought him mixing his alcohol will make a difference, eh? Oh, this was going to be as *fun* as it had been the last time. Those Spaniards never knew what hit them.

"Not at all, *mon ami*." A man with a fake French accent said as he put a glass in front of Jack while said pirate was eying the wagers already on the table. His was by far the biggest, which meant these men were unemployed and could use some money. Money Jack obviously had.

"Jus' don' go cryin' when you lose," a Chinese man sneered at the youngest player through his chapped lips and toothless mouth. The rest were a bit too busy eying the gold and still trying to decide whether Jack was naive or crazy. Or drunk already. Sparrow gave them a cheerful grin as his crew mates came to try and drag him from the table and the grin was so sharp they stopped halfway through their very first protests. He remained seated while a few of his fellow contestants now looked uneasy.

"I'll be sure to hold your braid out of the way when you start vomiting last week's breakfast, mate."

"Enough trash talk," a leather dressed man with a big cowboy hat, blond hair and blue eyes cut in, pulling out the cork from the bottle and sniffing the contents. It was so strong that Jack could smell it from where he sat across the table. "Time to put your money where your mouth is."

"I agree," a big African man with implants under his skin grunted, thrusting his glass at the cowboy to pour him a drink and he downed it instantly, sucking on a lemon slice, forgoing the salt altogether and slamming his glass upside down to show he was finished. Behind the man, there was a big board with the names of all of the contestants written on it and a boy of twelve hastily put one tick next to then name Ahmed. "Pour the poison, Gary."

Gary gave him a flat look as the black man arched a non-existing eyebrow as he poured it around. The blond looked at the Caribbean Pirate Lord, seated between the China man and the guy with the fake French accent, and he grinned. "What's your name, dead meet?"

"Jack, if you will."

"Well, Jack, welcome aboard the one way train to Hangoverswill." The cowboy said as he finished pouring everyone their drink, each of them taking it down with grimaces at the strength of the drink or a cough. Then they all turned to watch Jack expectantly and Sparrow just grinned at them,

swiped a little salt between thumb, pointer and middle fingers, licked them clean, downed his drink and sucked a lemon slice dry within ten seconds all, watching their surprised faces as he neither choked nor grimaced or showed he was in any way affected by the drink. His own companions were wide eyed, especially Will and Elizabeth as they could *smell* the alcohol from across the room. He met Gary's eyes and smiled.

"Drink up, me hearties, yo ho!"

He didn't notice a pair of eyes trained on him like a hawk.

00000

"I give up," a poor, poor English bastard groaned, green in the face as he watched Jack throw back one more shot of tequila, barely tipsy. Across the table, a Spaniard stood up and ran out of the establishment to throw up, nauseated by the mere sight of alcohol. After watching his sudden movement, a Russian and an Irishman followed suit, barely making it out before they were barding up all the food they had eaten in the last couple of days.

"Yo ho, yo ho, a pirate's life for me!"

"Enough," Ahmed moaned, his head pounding, dizzy, barely able to see straight, as it were. He had finally given in last round and he was watching with awe as Jack signaled another. "If he drinks any more he will die."

"Sea monsters can't kill a guy with his tolerance. Must be one of those damn gods in human flesh, he is." Gary said with grudging admiration as he poured him and the China man, Lee, another drink. And while Sparrow was barely tipsy, only a slight flush to his tan cheeks, eyes still sharp, tongue still eloquent, Lee was already deep in his cups and hiccuping on every third word. He didn't look too good.

Hearing the comment from another table over, the Black Pearl's crew choked on their own beverages while Jack himself just laughed, sucked on some salt, took his shot and sucked the lemon slice it went with. He steadily put his cup back, showing it was empty before winking at Lee. The Chinese pirate was now proudly slurring an ode to rice wine as he took up the cup and poured it bravely into his mouth, swallowing. He put it back down and grinned in victorious pride at Jack before promptly falling over, right out of his chair. He snoozed gently as he used Jack's booted feet as a pillow and Jack signaled for another.

"*Really* bad eggs," and the first signs of drunkenness in such a slight man after drinking tequila for two hours straight was just a slightly drunken giggle as he observed the seventeen he had drank under the table. The tavern cheered for the teen, many coming over to clap him on the back and to try to take some of his winnings, but Jack still had his wits about him and taking out his gun with a steady hand and a cocked eyebrow dissuaded any further attempts of the latter. Although he was widely propositioned to all kinds of ... pleasurable activity and more gambling challenges as he casually picked up his winnings and hid them in one of his numerous pockets, sipping on the rum he had not touched since he sat down.

Another man turned green and ran straight out, falling into the harbor in his drunken haste.

Jack just giggled again while Gary and Ahmed, the only two who still really had any of their wits around them even though they were well and truly drunk, stared in horror and awe.

"Holly shit. I mean, how does he take it? Where does it all go? Look at him! Your arm is bigger than him!" The blond complained to the African, who swore he was watching some mythical

creature instead of a man as Jack finished his tankard of rum and asked for another. "It should all be escaping through his ears by now."

"This is nothing," a voice said slightly behind and to Sparrow's left side and the teen stiffened. James immediately saw this and stood up, only slightly tipsy himself - they had all indulged themselves as they watched Jack drink his fellow competitors into a coma - hand on his sword as he eyed the tall man. He looked and sounded of Spanish origins, as tall as James with short black hair and small blue eyes, his skin only lightly tanned from his time in the sun. He must not have been on a ship in a long, long time. He was about Barbossa's age and held himself like a Navy man, an officer, judging by how he held his hands and how his eyes rowed instead of looking just straight. He was a handsome man and there seemed to be no malice in his eyes or voice or gestures as he put a hand on Jack's shoulder but the pirate was still stiff and uneasy, so James didn't back down. He saw from the corner of his eye the others reaching for their weapons as well before zeroing back in on the Spaniard. "He once drank an entire Spanish galleon under the table and the sea around our ship was a not so appealing green in the morning when he asked for rum. The Capitán forbade drinking contests since." He tsked disapprovingly at Sparrow. "You must stop drinking like this, birdie, before you die of alcohol poisoning. What would Capitán think?"

The Caribbean Pirate Lord was on his feet in a dizzying rush, glaring daggers at the older man, his eyes glassy with something other than drink. "Don't you *dare* bring up Armando in this!"

The Spaniard didn't look much impressed, although you could see his eyes rowing over Jack's face and body, brows furrowing in confusion. "He would not want you acting like this. Will you dishonor his memory by drinking yourself to your grave, birdie?"

"Enough," it came out almost as a beg this time around and the man's face softened. "Please don't talk about him. It's too soon. It's too soon." James came up next to Jack and drew him away from the Spanish man, but the glare he sent his way had Norrington stiffening and reaching for his sword. "It still hurts too much."

"Why are you still so you, Jack?" The Spaniard pitched his voice lower, leaning closer. "Please do not tell me you were cursed or died so young. The Capitán would be so sad."

"They say I died a year ago and ended up in the Locker." The Pirate Lord said bitterly. "I still don't know how, but I'm apparently de-aged by twenty years, so I don't think I died young."

The Spaniard's eyes narrowed at this, raising a hand towards Sparrow's face but the Captain flinched away. Norrington had a sword at the older man's neck in an instant. He frowned but let his hand fall back down. "Still not good enough."

Jack rolled his eyes but he seemed to have relaxed some. "Oh shut it, Frederico. I'm having enough trouble trying to figure out what's going on without you throwing Armando into it all. I have to get me a few more crew members and then have to sail to Shipwreck Cove and deal with sealed goddesses and scorned women and the Brethren Court and my Da - dear god, I need to speak with Da! Twenty years! Did I even see him once in those twenty years? Does he know I died? No, of course he does. But does he know I'm alive again?" He took hold of his head and groaned, as if in pain. "Bloody hell, my head hurts."

"Jack? Are ye alright?" Gibbs asked as he walked up to his young Captain, keeping a wary eye on Frederico. He put his hands on the teen's shoulders and made to move him away but Frederico had his sword out and pointed at him, but James sliced a thick trickle of blood on his neck as a response.

"Aye, the salt's just run its course." The youngest in the pub rubbed at his temples and glared at the



three surrounding him. "Frederico, Mr Gibbs is a friend of my family. My Grandmama and my Da would hunt him down if he killed me or let me come to harm. Mr Gibbs, I once sailed on the same ship as Frederico Sanchez. Armando would come back from the dead and hunt him down if he hurt me or let me get hurt. James, bloody leave him be. I don't want to repeat myself." He glared at all three of them at the same time - a miracle, as they had practically made a triangle position around him - until they all stepped down. He grinned and nodded, only to grab hold of his head again. "Ow. Giv' me somethin' salty b'fore me head bursts."

Gibbs gave a relieved laughed at the familiar drawl and Jack, not understanding his sudden need to make so loud a noise when his head was pounding, glared at him petulantly. James just smiled and took the Captain by the elbow, leading him over to the bar to get him some food that would hopefully make him feel a bit better. Frederico watched them go, an arched eyebrow at the way the Englishman was almost fretting over the teen and a small, sad smile crossed his lips.

"Capitán, your little Sparrow will be just fine."

Gibbs, forgotten about by the Spaniard, started, eyes going wide as he finally, *finally* realized at just *what* age they had gotten Jack back to.

"Curse of the seven seas," he swore. He was in *deep* shit once they got back to the Cove.

## Chapter 10

"Well, that went well," Jack said cheerfully the next day as they sailed away from the little Dutch port, no trace of a hangover or that he had been drinking enough for three men the day before. His new crew - five of the people he had drunk under the table in yesterday's competition - were still generously giving their guts to the sea. Jack just hoped the waves will wash it off of his Pearl's hull or his beloved ship might get pissed. Whoever doubted a ship was a woman ought to get their head checked.

Elizabeth, also looking over the crew, turned to give him an incredulous stare. "Jack, you drank enough alcohol to blind a man, managed to start two bar fights because you cheated at cards, nearly got Lieutenant Groves killed in your crazy escape attempt, pissed James off enough for him to refuse to come down from the crow's nest and unnerved the crew, old and new, by bringing that *Spanish Navy officer* on board. How can it be any worse?" When he opened his mouth and brought up a finger to say something or make a point, Elizabeth remembered that, although younger, this was still Jack Sparrow she was talking to, a man who had trouble as a loyal pet, and promptly cut him off. "Never mind, I don't want to know."

"Well, just to make it clear, I didn't cheat, I'm just that lucky-"

"Counting cards id cheating, Jack."

"*Lucky*. And I'm not to be blamed that Theodor decided to follow me onto that rooftop-"

"You know we've been all keeping a sharp eye on you! Of *course* he would go after you since he was the closest to you at the time!"

"*And* I am not to blame that the Navy doesn't train their men better. I am also not to blame, in no way whatsoever that dear James is in a tiff about Frederico coming along. And *as* for Frederico coming along," he said before she could protest. "He sailed with me once on a grand ship and his captain was very fond of me. He left the ship for retirement a month before the ship sank. Loved and respected his captain very much and, in turn, was protective of me since I was the captain's favorite. I couldn't have gotten rid of him if I had allowed a mermaid to drag me back to Atlantis right now. He'd probably follow." He looked away, eyes zeroing in to where said man was exchanging lethal glares with the good (ex) Admiral. "And he wouldn't have the same protection I do." He mumbled unconsciously, but Elizabeth heard. She whipped her head to the side to stare at him incredulously, not sure if he had really said it or if her ears were playing tricks with her but before she could ask, Will walked up the quarterdeck and the girl promptly turned around and climbed down to the main deck using the other stairs.

Jack watched as young Turner looked after her softly before shaking his head and continuing towards the Captain of the ship. Marty trailed after him like an afternoon shadow, keeping a safe distance yet staying within arm's reach should he have to act. Jack felt sort of insulted that they thought he could not defend himself. He'd faced much bigger fish than Turner. Quite literally, a few times.

"Jack, if I could have a word with you?"

"Just one?" Sparrow teased with a grin and watched Will's lips twitch sadly. In truth, Jack didn't hold it against him, what he would have done. Even if he'd gone through with it - which he would have, had he not been thwarted by one Mandarin speaking youngest Pirate Lord ever - Jack wouldn't have begrudged him for it. The boy had pirate in his veins. *Take what you can, give*

*nothing back*, savvy? The boy had only been doing what was right by himself, although he had endangered a lot of lives with his thoughtless stunt.

He had done one thing wrong, though. One thing Jack could not really forgive him. He had weighted lives. No one life was more worth than the other and yet William had found it fit to declare his father's soul worth the loss of ten, eleven - twelve if you counted his thoughtlessness in regards to Elizabeth's safety - others. Thirteen/fourteen, if you counted the monkey and the parrot. Who was Will to say his father deserved to live more than, say, Philip? Or James or Groves? Or Pintel, Ragetti, Marthy, Cotton or Gibbs? Even Jack and Barbossa? The three Navy boys? Tia Dalma? By which characteristic did Will judge his father better and more worthy to live? It was just like those in power on land, who decided who should be a slave or who should be a lord. For all that Jack didn't have the most glowing impression of piracy, he knew it wasn't paradise within the boundaries of the law anymore than it was outside of them.

Jack could forgive Will for betraying him. Well, he as the eighteen year old Captain Jack Sparrow of the Wicked Wench could; he, after all, didn't know William Turner Junior for longer than a week. He wasn't exactly sure about his thirty eight year old self. That Jack Sparrow knew Will Turner a lot longer and such a betrayal might severe their friendship, for all that Jack knew. And *he* himself was only willing to forgive him because the Black Pearl was still riding the waves under his booted feet. He wouldn't be so forgiving if she had been stolen from him.

She purred in delight into his ear at his possessive protectiveness and Jack almost smiled. Almost. Will didn't exactly earn it, now did he.

"I'm serious, Jack." Will insisted as he came closer but stopped when he heard Marty cocking his gun casually, sighing in frustration and staying in his place. "I need to discuss something with you."

"I'm sure you do, whelp, but I'm not supposed to talk about serious or stressing topics that might in some way make me uncomfortable, anxious, stressed or all of the above. Doctor's orders. Or, rather, the voodoo priestess' who did this," he gestured to his young-but-should-be-twenty-years-older-body with one hand. "To me to preserve my sanity after a year worth of torture in the infamous, blood-curling Davy Jones' Locker." He watched Will sigh in frustration, looking ready to tear his own hair out before deciding to help the man. "Although I would rather appreciate it if I were brought up to speed about the most ... recent events. In the last, say ... twenty years. You up for it whelp?"

"I'm older than you. You can't exactly call me whelp, Jack." Despite his teasing, Turner looked genuinely relieved and grateful. The Pirate Lord almost felt like he was doing him a favor when it would in truth be Jack who was getting something out of it. Now, if only he could get rid of his many, many watchdogs, it would be a delight. "And I'll gladly bring you up to speed."

"Not if ya don' wan' me t' go t' Lady Dalma an' tell 'er ya're tryin' t' stress th' Capti'n." Marty grunted, glaring at the Port Royal blacksmith. Both young men sighed in exasperation but they knew they couldn't really do anything. Not if the core crew was so dead set on keeping Jack in the dark of what had been happening in the years since ... whatever point in time they had plucked him from.

"Marty, mate, who's the Captain of this ship?" Jack challenged but Marty shrugged.

"E talks, I go t' the voodoo witch an' tell yar Navy friend what's goin' on. An' then I sit back an' watch the fireworks. An' I don't think it will be as colorful as those in Singapore."

Jack pouted. Why did he have to bring James into this? He already had to figure out why he had

angered his unlikely friend so they could hopefully make amends and go back to being friends again. Hopefully. But that meant giving up the opportunity to learn about his future, erm past? Or was it the present he needs to learn about. Bloody hell, this was giving him a worse headache than the drinking competition did yesterday. Was it even possible to get a worse headache than one induced by as potent a drink as tequila? Maybe from vodka. Or an oar to the head.

Sparrow frowned at the last thought, turning to Will. "Do you know if I've ever been hit over the head with an oar? I know it hasn't happened in my current eighteen years of life, but what about the twenty ones I've lived through and don't currently remember?"

The blacksmith winced and looked away in sheepish shame. "I may have once hit you over the head with one. On an island called Isla de Muerta."

"Isle of the Dead? What were we doing there?" The dreadlocked male furrowed his brow before it hit him. Thankfully, not literally this time. "Oh! The cursed gold because of which Barbossa mutinied against me and left me on an abandoned island to die? I actually went to take Cortez' cursed treasure? Was I bloody mad? I've met his damned ghost!"

"You ... what?" Marty and Will were looking at him as though he had grown a second head. Jack ignored how incredulous their stare was and just continued on with his story.

"Oh, I met his ghost. When I was twelve and first escaped Shipwreck Cove to make my own path - outside of piracy, mind you. Hated it back then."

"Hated piracy?" Theodor, as though he could sniff out when a good pirate story - especially a Jack Sparrow pirate story - was being told, climbed up the quarterdeck, looking shocked. "But you're a pirate!"

"Yes and have been since birth. Although I hadn't wanted to acknowledge it, back then. Like I said, used to hate it. Still not quite all that fond of it. I hate the cruelty of some pirates. But we're not the only cruel ones, now, are we?" He smiled sorrowfully before it was gone and replaced with a much cheerier grin. "Anyway, I was twelve and ran away from home, procured a ship - a boat, really - named it the Barnacle and found meself a crew and we set sail, reaching for the horizon and the treasure and adventures that await just beyond it." He said like a true story teller, drawing Elizabeth back onto the quarterdeck so she, too, could hear. James and Philip had followed after Theodor when he had all but teleported to the other side of the ship, Gibbs, Tia Dalma, Pintel, Ragetti and Mr Cotton joining them after Barbossa cleared the staircase. Gary, Ahmed and a much recovered Lee listened from the main deck as best as they could but did not join the core crew at the helm. Much of the rest of the crew were watching in interest and Frederico was leaning against the railing at the stairs, within hearing but not within sight of Sparrow, listening.

Jack grinned at his audience, sent a look at Will that clearly said they would be talking later, shared a secretive, joking smile with Tia Dalma before continuing with his story.

"And our first goal, our very first treasure-hunting adventure was to find the Sword of Cortez."

00000

Since there was enough crew this time around to make not two, but three regular watches, Jack had for once gone to sleep instead of spending the entire night at the helm, either alone and whispering with his beloved ship like a pair of lovers or sharing small talk, stories and jokes with James. But James was still in a tiff with him and Jack was still actually tired after his drinking fiasco, so that night, he gladly walked into his cabin, sprawled into his cot and fell asleep the second his head hit the pillow.

Before the night ends, he will dearly regret it, no matter how much he had needed it.

00000

*There was a wonderful soft breeze playing with his hair, making the couple of beads and trinkets he had in his hair jingle and chime. He had only just started his collection, since his hair had finally grown long enough, if Tia Dalma was to be believed. She had shown him how to braid his hair and make dreadlocks and he had found it to be as fun as it was relaxing and he so loved the idea of keeping memories close to him this way. He was also glad that he had an actual piratical hoarding habit and always saved at least one tiny bit of any of his adventures for mementos. It already gave him two full length braids of beads, but he hoped he'll make much, much more memories in the future.*

*He touched the newest addition to his memory collection hairdress - a pretty blue stone that resembled a finely cut crystal that always gave off a barely visible glow when wet and had a very special function - as he thought about the person who gave it to him, just leaning on the railing of a great, big ship, not noticing someone had come up behind him until a strong hand landed on his head. He yelped, whirling around in half panic, expecting a blue coat and white wig to adorn the person standing behind him, inly to relax when he was met with neither. Instead, the man arching an amused brow at him had wonderfully soft - but always bound; what sacrilege! - black hair and although he stood like a soldier and owning a uniform, he was not wearing an English blue or red coat, or even his own white and black one. Instead, he stood on the deck of the big galleon in only an unbuttoned white linen shirt and black trousers.*

*The teen flushed, turning his black eyes away from all that beautiful, almost unmarred skin that seemed to glow in the light of the half moon. His companion chuckled as he came to lean a hip against the railing.*

*"Don't do that." Came the mumbled complaint, a hand pressed against a madly racing heart. Said hand then had to move up to push out of the way the just below the chin long locks out of his face, not seeing another, paler hand reach out to do the same. He nearly jumped out of his own skin for the second time in just a few minutes when gentle fingers pushed a few locks behind his ear.*

*A regretful sigh came from the older male. "You have been on my ship for a month now, little Sparrow, and yet you still flinch away from my touch while you have befriended even my grumpy helmsman. I feel insulted."*

*"Francis ain't all that bad," came the reply, muffled as it was. He avoided meeting the other's amber eyes, knowing he will only blush again. Or stare shamelessly at the toned chest so casually on display.*

*The captain only chuckled and shook his head. "I am actually pretty sure only you are of that opinion, little Sparrow." The younger shivered at the rolled, accented 'r' before finally turning to face his unexpected companion and glare at the older man. He shoved an accusing, angry, bejeweled finger right under an elegant nose, unconsciously leaning closer to the taller male. He forgot all the reasons why he shouldn't be so close to the other - the way his heart would always beat a staccato rhythm, the way his palms would get sweaty unlike when even the prettiest of wenches pushed their bosom into his face, unlike even when he had, that one time, stared down the devil himself when he had been over a foot shorter and three years younger with no weapon in hand - as he delivered his complaint in a growl. Oh, if only his voice was lower! It still held too much of a childish lilt for it to be intimidating.*

*"Stop calling me that already! I've told you already a hundred times that it is insulting and degrading and that it annoys the hell out of me! And what's worse, your crew have started calling*

*me birdie!" He huffed, poking the man in the chest, still not realizing how close he actually was and how his companion was perhaps a bit too preoccupied staring at his mouth to pay much attention to what was coming out of it. "I demand to stop being treated like just some little kid! I've seen more things than all of you combined and I want to be treated as an equal, not as some brat you've taken in and feel responsible for!"*

*"I will talk to my crew. If it truly bothers you so, I will tell them to stop teasing you." The captain said, taking a step back and the younger frowned. Why had he moved away. "I would also wish to apologize for causing you such stress over such a matter. I did not wish to upset you. I will stop."*

*He sounded too formal, the teen thought and he didn't like it. He bit his lip. While he wasn't exactly fond of the stupid nickname, he also knew the other took great delight in calling him 'little Sparrow'. It always made a smile stretch his usually frowning lips. He had even overheard the crew gossiping among themselves that their new birdie had stolen the captain's heart. Now, the teen knew it had to be just teasing since he was passing by, since he was sure everyone on this damned ship knew of his ... stirrings ... for their captain. It's why he hated the nickname so much.*

*"I ... I guess I don't really mind as much as I came off just now." He mumbled, finding his behavior very ridiculous and humiliating. He, who had been praised for his silver tongue and sharp wit, acting like this for no feasible reason whatsoever. He, who had managed to bargain with Tia Dalma for her precious Compass that she never even considered giving another. She would be laughing at him now, if only she knew how tongue tied he felt. "It's just ... Why must it be 'little sparrow'? Isn't a sparrow small enough, why add that infuriating 'little'?" He glared out at the sea. "It's as though you were mocking me. Like you only see me as some useless kid. I just ... want to be your equal."*

*He wasn't expecting for a hand to grab his face gently and turn him around so he was facing his companion fully, their dark eyes locked, black on brown. He gulped. They looked so serious, so intent. Had he insulted the other, somehow, with his words? But there was such gentleness in the fingers holding his face that he immediately ruled it out. He felt out of breathe.*

*"It was never my intention to push you away so, li- Jack." It was perhaps the first time in three and a half weeks that the other said his name. Jack shivered in delight. He couldn't help it. He wasn't sure if it was the lighting or his imagination, but he swore those brown eyes became a few shades darker. And he would know. They were so close ... They were actually sharing each other's breaths and their noses were nearly bumping. "I never saw it as us not being equals. In fact, I do believe you have the makings to become a great, worthy opponent, one day, if the fates are so cruel as to place us on opposing sides. You are possibly the only one I would be content to lose against. I did not mean any disrespect and I apologize if I've led you to believe so."*

*"All's forgiven," was all Jack could say, eyes half lidded as he enjoyed the exploring fingers on his face, especially when they whispered over his lips. He swallowed, his throat feeling dry.*

*A smirk curled on the other male's lips. "Do you wish me to prove how I have never seen you as anything else than my equal?"*

*"Hm?" The fifteen year old made a confused, halfhearted sound as a hand came up absently to brush a lock of hair that had miraculously fallen out of the bun the other wore at the nape of his neck.*

*"Do you wish for me to prove that I always thought of you as an equal?" The elder replied patiently, although Jack's mind registered an almost ... predatory note. His instinct was alerting him to the presence of a predator but his body was enjoying the closeness with his companion too much to move away.*

"How?"

*The captain smirked and dipped his head in as fast as lightning, capturing young, soft, yielding lips in an equally bruising and gentle kiss, the hand caressing the tanned face moving into messy hair. A moan echoed in the air before fluttering hands settled on broad shoulders and they stayed like that for a long moment before pulling back, both panting. Black eyes were glazed as they looked up at the older man, who was licking his lips, as though to catch the last of Jack's taste.*

"A-Armando?"

*"There. See?" Armando pushed Jack against the railing gently, lifting the fifteen year old so he was sitting on it and moving between lean legs, securely holding onto a thin waist. "I see you as an equal. If I saw you as a brat, I would not even consider doing that. But, as you can see, I did it. So I see you as an equal. I see you, actually, as the only person I wouldn't mind being the end of me, for you already are, my little Sparrow." A mouth attached itself to a long neck and Jack tipped his head back to provide more space for Armando to work with. "I'm losing my mind for you. My self. My control. My heart. It belongs to you. You will be the end of me, my little Sparrow." He sighed and reluctantly moved away. "I'm sorry. I'm coming on too strong. I shall leave you for now and please forgive my too forward behavior."*

*"But what if I liked it?" Jack protested, biting his lip as his eyes stayed on Armando. The captain chuckled and ran a hand over his face, trying to get it together and not be tempted to continue where they had left off.*

*"You truly will be the end of me, my little Sparrow."*

*Jack smiled and reached out his hand - that didn't feel right. He didn't remember ever offering his hand to the other - expecting the other to take it, but the peace of the night was broken by sudden loud noise. Shouts, cannon and gun fire, clattering of swords and knives, screams of pain and death. The stench of burning bodies and ships soon invaded the sea breeze and Jack felt sick. He looked around, not understanding what the hell was going on. Why was the ship suddenly burning? Why was the crew frozen? Why wasn't anyone abandoning the ship? This was too much fire for it all to be put out in time! Where was Armando?!*

*He looked around frantically before he found Armando, still standing in front of him, only he was dressed in his uniform. And he was grim faced, a glare in his eyes as he pointed a gun at Jack's head. Jack, however, could only watch in horror as, just as the captain released the safety, a wave of fire rushed towards him, engulfing the white and black figure whole, bringing with it the stench of burning flesh.*

*Tears stung Jack's eyes, closed his throat and clogged his nose and yet the stench persisted.*

*A scream ripped out of his throat-*

00000

And suddenly there were elderly, strong hands shaking his shoulders as he screamed and trashed about on his cot, tears streaming down his face and Armando's name falling from his lips in desperate calls for the other man. He was deaf to the world for a long moment before he registered Mr Gibbs' almost hysteric calling of alternately his name and his title.

"Jack! Wake up, Capt'n! It was just a bad dream, Jack! There ya go, lad, nice and deep, long breaths. That's it. Yer doin' great, Capt'n. Great."

Through his harsh breathing, Jack could hear murmurs coming from his door and through teary eyes looked up at the confused and worried faces of his crew. He winced at the worry on the finely chiseled face of James Norrington and did his best not to look at Frederico Sanchez' understanding and pitying expression. His heart was still fluttering like a frightened rabbit's and the stench would not leave his nose. He made a gagging sound and Gibbs thrust a pitcher under his chin, holding back his hair as he threw up his lunch and dinner. A minute later, when he thought he had calmed down, he let his breakfast join the mix before his stomach settled down and he curled up on his cot, hiding his face in his pillow. He heard Gibbs, with James', Tia Dalma's and Frederico's help, chase everyone back to their hammocks or stations, as there were still some hours left until dawn.

Jack doubted he will sleep again that night. Not even the Pearl whispering lullabies in his ear could calm him enough. He might as well gather his wits about himself and just go up to the helm. The fresh air will surely help him.

"Capt'n? I know it be an awful stupid question t' ask, but are ye alright?" Joshamee had returned, alone, the great cabin's doors locked with Frederico swearing he will ensure no one eavesdrops, looking worriedly down at the eighteen year old. He looked so small right now, not at all like his usual self, so much bigger than life itself. Gibbs had every right to be worried.

"Not really, but I will be. Eventually. Soon enough." The Pirate Lord mumbled miserably, wincing at how abused his throat felt from the acids in his stomach traveling the wrong way. "Did I say anything? In my nightmare?"

"You just screamed one name, sir. Armando." The old sailor hesitantly pronounced the name and regretted it when Jack flinched and curled even more in on himself. He briefly wondered at the wisdom of his next question, but he had to know. He had to know so he can be prepared for future, similar situations. So he can help his young friend and Captain. In the end, it was for Jack's own good, not just idle curiosity. "Jack? Capt'n?"

"Yes, Mr Gibbs?"

"The Armando you called out to," he did his best to ignore the second wince. "Does he, mayhap, happen to be ... *that* Armando?" When he got no reaction, Gibbs warily continued. "Spanish Captain Armando Salazar of the Silent Mary, El Matador del Mar, the greatest pirate hunter until now that Davy Jones is under Beckett's command? *That* Armando, Capt'n?"

Jack still gave no answer, having turned his back on his first mate, huddled up to the black boards of the Pearl's hull and enjoying her comforting shudders.

"Jack, just *what* is it that you last remember?"

Sparrow answered.



## Chapter 11

"I'm going to take it you mean the last widely known happening, aye?" He didn't see the older man nod, but he didn't need to. He knew he did and just continued his story. "The last most widely known happening that my current memory is privy to is the already legendary Battle of the Devil's Triangle, where a bonny lass ship by the name of Wicked Wench outmaneuvered the infamous, legendary Silent Mary, tricking her and her crew to sail straight into the deadly and uncharted waters of the cursed, rocky passage which could put even Shipwreck Cove's Crossing to shame, straight into their doom. It's been a month since then in my memory, Mr Gibbs. The only event as big and as memorable as that that has followed is my becoming the Pirate Lord of the Caribbean, and it has still not spread so wide to be as widely known as the defeat of El Matador del Mar."

"By the gods, Jack!" The old sailor cursed fervently under his breath, staring at the curled up form of the legendary Jack Sparrow with wide, shocked, *stunned* eyes. "I already knew you had somehow been involved in that war but I had never thought you were *right there*. You were right damned lucky to have been able to survive. The pilot must have been touched by the gods to have not sailed you all straight in with the Silent Mary. I've heard about the Devil's Triangle. It is said to be right impossible to escape it if you've set course towards its mouth. It sounds like a right feat worthy of any of your harebrained schemes and impossible stories."

Jack stayed quiet, beringed fingers of one hand caressing the boards of the Black Pearl's hull while the fingers of his other hand were touching the trinkets in his hair, desperately wanting to know where they came from. He only knew a handful. His wish had come true and he had seen many a adventures since he was fifteen, and even more since he was eighteen, it would seem. And not all were with his beloved ship so even she couldn't tell him all about them like she could for every other memory. Not even Gibbs could know them all, of that Jack was certain. So only his adult self knew them and, unless Jack heals from whatever had happened to him in the Locker to affect him so badly that Tia Dalma resorted to such drastic measures, all of it would be forgotten. The trinkets and beads would lose their meaning and Jack feared nothing more than that, at that very moment. It felt like losing a part of himself. He had already lost quite a bit of himself to others he had trusted himself with. How could he lose any more? Would any of him remain, when it was all said and done?

As the silence stretched, Joshamee realized what he had said, let his mind ponder on it before his mouth fell open, his jaw hitting the floor, eyes even wider and more stunned than before. "I-it was *you*? Really, really *you*?" A breathless laugh escaped him, hand shaking as he reached up into his breast pocket for his leather flask. He uncorked it and took a long swing and a deep breath before he felt he was ready to face his de-aged Captain - the apparent killer of the Butcher of the Sea - again. "Of course it was *you*. How could I forget? You're Captain Jack Sparrow. If the Black Pearl was indeed the Wicked Wench-

"She is," Jack cut in quietly, still not facing the older man.

"Then of *course* only *you* could guide her through such a risky maneuver. How could I be so stupid as to not even consider the thought? I knew you were on one of those ships and that you saw what happened. I just ... I just somehow never put two and two together and got four. I always got three."

"That's a butchery of mathematics right there, Mr Gibbs," finally, *finally*, Jack turned around just enough to face his old friend, a miniature of his normal smile a shadow of itself on his lips. Gibbs still relaxed upon seeing it, although he was still very close to hysterics. He had thought he knew Jack Sparrow well enough by now, possibly better than anyone else than the man's own father -

and even that was iffy at times - but it would seem he was wrong. Horribly, terrifyingly wrong.

Joshamee studied the teen for a long moment, thoughts speeding at well over fourteen knots, drinking a few more gulps of the rum before he sighed and offered it to the lad. Jack sat up properly and drank a gulp, feeling some of his inner tremors calm a bit before he returned the flask to its owner. Joshamee handed it back before he asked the question that has been plaguing his mind as soon as his suspicions were confirmed. And maybe even before.

"You were awfully close, Salazar and you, aye?"

Jack didn't answer immediately - and that was actually answer enough - but he took a swig of rum before nodding. "Yes."

"He loved you, didn't he?"

The other smiled bitterly. "Went after me to the gates of hell. Literally. Didn't even think much about it. I ruined a good man, Mr Gibbs."

"And you?"

"Hm?" The teen made the inquisitive noise as he took one final sip and gave the almost empty flask back to the old sailor. Joshamee didn't take it, wondering if this line of questioning was good for either of their sanities. Or health. He shuddered to think what Miss Dalma will do to him if he delayed or in any bad way influenced Jack's recovery.

"You, Jack. Did you ... Did you love him back?" It would explain a lot of Jack's often strange behavior. If, in his mind, it had only been a month since the Battle at the Devil's Triangle, then it was to be expected that he hadn't yet learned to live with it. And he was so young, hadn't even seen half of what his older self had. Or at least Gibbs thought so. The longer he talked to this eighteen year old lad, the more he felt he didn't know his friend at all.

Jack didn't drink this time. Seeing that Gibbs was in no hurry to take back the flask, he made sure it was properly closed before putting it aside on his cot, drawing his knees to his chest, one arm wound around them, and rested his chin there as his free hand held up his Compass. Gibbs leaned over to see what it was pointing to but he didn't recognize the direction as some particular place, only a heading. West. Towards the Atlantic.

"Do you know I wanted to go back, Mr Gibbs?"

"Back, Capt'n?" The old sailor repeated, not following.

"Back to the Triangle. I wanted to go back." At Gibbs' incredulous stare, he smiled bitterly, sorrowfully. "I wanted to go back. To see if there were any survivors. To see for myself what I have done. To mourn. To make sure nothing ... unnatural was taking place."

"Unnatural?" It would seem good ol' Gibbs had been reduced to repeating random words coming out of his Captain's mouth. Although it also might be the rum.

"Unnatural, Mr Gibbs. You see, the Devil's Triangle is cursed. Dreadfully cursed. The most gruesome curse you can find and then made worse, savvy?" Sparrow said as he stared off in the direction his Compass was pointing in. The Pearl shuddered under them, breaking him out of his daze and haunted black eyes met Gibbs' amber ones. Joshamee shivered. He had never seen Jack look like this. Not even when he had lost the Black Pearl to Barbossa, since he had been too determined to get her back instead of wallowing in regret. But he couldn't get *this* back, now could he? Especially not now, twenty years later. The despair of realizing he had never gone back like he

had apparently wanted to was haunting him worse than a ghost with a grudge. He was too young to deal with this. Much too young.

"What curse be that?"

"I don't know," came the resigned answer. "One bad enough for even Tia Dalma to pity whichever poor sod is caught up in it. Anyway, I wanted to go there and ... Well, I wanted to check. To see if it had ... taken them. You see, mate, the curse targets only those who are not ... at the very least a *bit* content in their last moments. Rage, regret, sorrow ... It preys on it like a wild animal."

"And you fear they weren't content?" Gibbs asked carefully. Jack just snorted derisively.

"How could they be? They were the finest, strongest Navy force in the Atlantic and the Caribbean. The Spanish Main as a whole, including other navies and not just pirates, trembled in fear when the *Silent Mary* and her infamous captain was mentioned. And yet they were defeated by a *boy* pirate. How could they ever be content? It's like a final insult, to see that where a fleet of some of the strongest regional pirates had failed, a child that still stank of his mother's milk had succeeded. Had *mocked* and *taunted* them as he did it." He looked mournfully down at his faithful *Compass*. "They must hate me. I used to be a part of them, we were *amigos*, but then I ran away. What must have Armando thought of me? Did he learn to hate me? In life or in death?"

"You're selling yourself short, Jack." Joshamee cut in before the turn of the conversation could get any more depressing. "You're not just *any* pirate boy! You're Jack Sparrow!"

Said teen's face stretched in the most bitter, most sorrowful, heart wrenching smile he had ever laid his eyes on. "I wasn't until a month ago. Well, to the *Merry's* crew, maybe, although they preferred to call me 'birdie'. But the name Sparrow ... Armando Salazar gave it to me, Mr Gibbs. When I was fifteen, he used to call me his 'little Sparrow'. I guess it stuck, because he declared me 'Jack the Sparrow' as he yelled orders to chase and catch us. 'Jack the Sparrow' was heard as 'Jack Sparrow' and I guess the crew kind of just assumed it was because I had taunted him up in the crow's nest with my arms 'flapping around like a little bird'. So I became Jack Sparrow."

Gibbs blinked, his jaw flapping open and closed, open and closed, a bit stunned by this revelation. He had always assumed that Jack had chosen the name himself. Or that some native tribe, maybe his mother's, had given it to him. He had never, ever, *ever* even *considered* it a possibility that it had once been a nickname, a term of endearment by such a deadly man who had, against all reason, apparently fallen in love with a corporal representation of all that he hated. For Jack was a pirate, through and through. Joshamee had never met someone who exuded piracy yet contradicted its most famous stereotypes like Jack Sparrow did. But, seeing as who he was and what he had seen and been through, it was only logical for Jack to be completely different from all other pirates navy ships chase around the globe.

He shook his head. That wasn't what they were discussing and it didn't matter at this point in time. "That doesn't matter. Even before you were Jack Sparrow, you were still Jack T-"

"*Mr Gibbs*," Jack cut him off with the hissed warning. "Might I remind you the first rule that is not to even be spoken of within my family?"

Said man flinched as he realized what he had almost said. It's not as though anyone could eavesdrop with the Spaniard guarding the great cabin, but what about said Spaniard? Would he listen in on them? Better not to find out, he guessed.

"No matter. You know what I mean. You take it all in stride. You were *twelve*, for god's sake, when we met after you were kidnapped by the Navy. And I've seen you make much more

spectacular escapes over the years. And I *know* you, Jack. At least better than most. You're not nearly as much of a fool as you act." He patted the boy's shoulder, delighting in the absence of the earlier melancholy. If a little anger was all it was needed to push it back, then that was just fine with Gibbs. Soon enough, Jack would once again be at the helm and the wind, the sun, the horizon, the sea and the Pearl will turn his mood back to normal. Or at least he hoped it would. But he knew the lad won't be getting any more shuteye tonight. Not with what he'd just learned and no doubt after that nightmare he'd just had. "If Salazar knew you as half as well as I do, then he knew, too. He would know you were his equal, even though you were younger."

Jack, remembering the memory he had dreamed off, felt an internal wince but at least it didn't show on his face. No need to worry Gibbs any more than he already was. It wouldn't be good for his old heart. "Who knows." He said diplomatically, really not wanting to continue this conversation. The memories were still far too fresh, the sorrow too raw, the spilled blood still too warm. He watched as his Compass unwaveringly showed the direction to the Devil's Triangle and sighed before finally snapping it shut. It startled Gibbs out of some rant he had fallen into about Jack's adventures and ability to surprise even those who knew him well and the older man looked up. "If you don't mind me, Mr Gibbs, I'd rather like to get some more rest before I begin my day. There is an hour or so still until sunrise."

"O' course, Capt'n. I hope you rest well." Neither of them mentioned sleep, as it was dead obvious Jack was far too awake for that. Still, the two friends nodded at each other and with one last concerned look over his shoulder, Gibbs exited the room, shooing Frederico away. Jack lay in his bed and waited, for seemingly countless minutes, for them to move away and then waited some more until he could comfortably say that they were either distracted by something else or had went to try and get some shuteye bellow deck. To be sure he could leave his cabin without precautions, Jack opened his Compass again, wanting to know where each and every individual crew member was on the ship. Seeing as no one was on the main deck and there was only one person in the crow's nest and at the helm - his Pearl whispered to him what the two directions meant and where exactly everyone else was bellow deck - Jack carefully opened his door, making sure they don't squeak and slowly made his way down bellow. His beloved gladly whispered to him warnings, giving away who was awake and who was just dozing.

Jack waited for the opportune moment, watching Frederico finally force himself to sleep like military taught him before he started sneaking around the sleeping quarters. He was prepared for the lunge of the sword when he shook William, as well as the shout that would have followed it had he not shot out with both hands and stopped both. Will stilled when he saw who it was and relaxed his arm. Jack used the now free hand to place a finger to his lips to signal for silence and only removed his other hand when Turner nodded. He stepped back and gestured with a hand to follow, *quietly*, mind you, as he restarted the process of sneaking about. He remembered the prank he had played the last time he had come to wake someone up and looked over to the Admiral, finding him restless in sleep. Unlike last time with moving the boots - Will had not been happy to search the entire ship for them in the morning chill - he moved a few strands of bleaching light brown hair gently before removing his hand and walking away. He ignored Will's stare at his back as he listened to the Black Pearl whispering a safe location for them to have a private talk, giggling like a naughty little girl being let in on a secret.

Most people would not dare come within three feet of the person who had almost led a mutiny against them, but Jack was not most people. Case and point, one Hector Barbossa, self proclaimed mutineer and pretender for the position of Captain aboard Jack's beloved lady, was still walking about, unrestrained, unharmed and without constant supervision. And *he* was a far greater threat than Turner can ever hope to be. Anyway, not that Jack was afraid of either of them. Even if they *did* try something, his lass wouldn't stand for it. She had always been possessive of him - as had he of her - and she was extra possessive of him now, apparently ever since they had their

reunion. But she had now grown almost as overprotective of him as his Da was and he had thought that impossible. He guessed it had mostly to do with his de-aging and all of that. She knew he could take care of himself but he was not the Jack she was now used to. He wondered briefly if she was struggling as much to accept his twenty years into the past change as he was hers twenty years into the future change. Right a pair of wackos, he and his bonny ship were.

When they finally arrived in one of the empty cargo holds - only one out of three; the Pearl was well stocked from their unexpected raid that came out of Captain Finch's stupid attempt at plundering a Pirate Lord's vessel - Will finally spoke up, questioning why they were here and why Jack had woken him in the middle of the night.

"Actually, sunrise is maybe an hour or so away. The night is pretty much over." Sparrow threw in jokingly before becoming dead serious. And a funny phrase, that was. For how were the dead serious? They were *dead*. He shook the thought away. "You said we needed to talk. I think I just provided us with a private moment or two."

The blacksmith turned pirate blinked at him with still sleepy eyes before understanding dawned on him through the mist of half sleep and he nodded. "Yes. I- Well, first, I wanted to apologize. For what I almost did." Turner looked like a scolded boy, almost fidgeting in place under the intense scrutiny of a man who should be his senior but was now instead so much younger than him. For god's sake, Will was twenty nine, eleven whole years older than Jack! He wondered briefly if Jack always felt like he needed to leave a good impression on Will like Will felt now towards Jack. Except Will was sure Jack, even at this age, was far less impressionable than Will had ever been. The teen already knew his way around now better than Will did even after all this time around pirates.

"Hey, I understand. You wanted to free your father. Although that's not something I can quite relate to." Jack shrugged and the (currently) older male frowned.

"You and your father don't get along?"

"Actually, I wouldn't know as of right now, but that's not the point I was trying to make. You see, my Da *wouldn't* be caught in some mess he can't get out of. Well, unless it involves saving me. Then all's fair game; even stupidity!" The dreadlocked teen shook his head and focused back on the topic at hand. It was best not to think about his father right now. He'll deal with him once they got to Shipwreck Cove and *that* will be interesting enough on its own. "But, that aside, you implied that you were willing to risk the wrath of Tia Dalma - and quite possibly a dozen others and Tia will be tough enough to handle all on her own, whelp - to tell me what's been going on since that whole ... Isla de Muerta business."

Will smiled at the silly, animated hand gestures that Jack used to emphasize his thoughts. Although Jack at this age already had some of his eccentricities, they still weren't all that well defined. Looks like Tia Dalma wasn't kidding when she said he had perfected a mask to fool others. Will still remembered their duel. Jack had not fought like that in the forge, that first time in Port Royal. He had not even fought Barbossa like this Jack had dueled for fun. A mask to fool, indeed. And it was doing quite a fine job.

"I still need to insist on apologizing-"

"Will," the other cut him off. His eyes were hard and blank. Turner shut up. "It won't take them long to realize I am indeed not in my cabin but rather wandering about. If you don't start talking, we won't get another chance like this. So, please, just ... Just tell me. Tell me everything."

William gulped at the look in Jack's eyes. "Everything?" Oh, if Tia Dalma hears of this, he

was *so* dead.

The teenager just nodded.

Will took a deep breathe-

And told him. Told him everything.

00000

"And so here we are now, heading for Shipwreck Cove and you in your current ... condition. That's all of it." William was finishing up when the first morning rays of light started lighting up the lower decks of the Black Pearl, biting his lip nervously when his audience just stayed still and quiet for a very long moment. "Jack?" He ventured carefully and it snapped Sparrow back to reality from inside his own thoughts.

He frowned. "I need to think." He quickly got back up to his feet from where they had sat down behind a few barrels during the long retelling and scuttled away before Will could try and stop him. He sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

"What have I done?"

## Chapter 12

### Chapter Notes

Songs: Sad Stephen's Song by Duncan Sheik, The Ocean - Best Mermaid Song EVER! by The Hania Show and Jolly Sailor Bold from Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides. Enjoy!

There was this one quiet moment on the deck of the Black Pearl as the night shift went to fetch the day watch where there was no one out and about, the black deck free of all souls. The living ones, at least. Jack couldn't exactly see if there were any unhappy souls still wandering around as pissed off ghosts with a grudge, but since his Pearl wasn't complaining, he figured there was none. And it is this one precious, quiet, lonesome moment that Jack used as his *opportune* moment to walk out onto the deck and just ... stare at the sea, as he stood on the railing on the main deck. The Pearl seemed to gentle her rocking, as if to allow him for his mind to wander further without him being put in unnecessary danger. Such a sweaty, his bonny lass was.

But there was no need for that. For all that Jack's thoughts were far away - only technically - his mind was right there, thinking and turning over an idea over and over again. It was not safe, for any party involved with it. The new crew might try to mutiny and Jack would really rather not have to subdue their will and leave them to float in the middle of nowhere. He'd do it, as the alternative was unacceptable, but he'd still it rather not come to that. The core crew won't be any happier about it. Jack could just imagine being locked up in his cabin - essentially grounded like a misbehaving child - by them until they reach the Crossing and when Gibbs would finally argue for them to let him out so he can get them all safely inside.

But, the truth of the situation was, he'll feel much safer if he does what he is thinking about doing. He was currently surrounded by betrayers, mutineers, Navy officers, strangers, three loyal men and a woman whose presence implies things he'd rather not think about. And an undead monkey. Don't forget the undead monkey. Anyway ...

He felt surrounded, boxed in, *caged*. It was never good, for anyone, when Jack Sparrow felt caged. It had nothing to do with brigs or prison cells. He can always just ... *feel* it when the walls are closing in on him. And that's how he's feeling right now. He was drowning, even though he's on a dry deck on the only ship he could trust to sail him through the gates of hell and back in one piece. Even though he *can't*. He was *suffocating*. He was *sinking*. What was dragging him down? He should be able to fly free as a bird, as his namesake. Yet something was dragging him down, under the ways, into the deep, dark abys, even though he *knew* nothing would do that to him. Not now. Not after that one time when he was fifteen.

That one night had started him on this road, had put him in Armando's and had crossed his path with the paths of all those currently on board. That one *person* had led him towards happiness and safety, even though it had been so short. He had made an ally that day, one that will be an ally for all of eternity.

Surrounded by strangers and only two friends, Jack really could use one more ally.

With that thought, Jack reached up with the hand that wasn't holding onto to of of lines and guided it to his hair. He pushed through trinkets, familiar and new, until his fingers brushed that one very

special blue bead. Dark eyes fell to half mast and lowered almost reverently to the blue depths, fingers gently grasping the bead and wondering, for just a moment, if this will still work like it once used to. Then he chased those thoughts away and started to hum.

*"They were young, and they were fair*

*The brushed their bronze and*

*Dusky hair*

*And whispered, 'Come sad*

*Sailor, come and play here.*

*You will love, you will be loved.*

*You will be strong, you will be sung*

*By all the mermaids, pretty*

*Mermaids."*

00000

"Good mornin', Capt'n."

"Howdy, Cap!"

"Captain."

"Morning, Jack."

"Sparrow."

"Good morning, Jack."

"Jack."

"Capt'n! Mornin'!"

Jack very nearly snapped and snarled at them all after the tenth "Good morning, Jack" and versions echoed the ship, driving him *mad*. He could practically *see* it already forming on their lips, the things they *really* wanted to say. *What happened last night, Jack? And Are you okay, Jack? And what was that, Sparrow? And Can you even be the Captain of this ship right, Sparrow?* It was driving him *crazy*. Damn it all, he just wanted to shout at them all to just *shut the bloody hell up and get the hell back to work, you lazy bilge rats*, but that would only make things worse. Somehow. He still wasn't sure it could *possibly* get any worse than it currently was.

*'You'd think that a bloke could get some piece and quiet on his own quarterdeck, but noooo. Today is the sacred, never forgotten 'let's bother Jack' day. However could I have forgotten.'* He was pretty sure that it was unhealthy for a person to express that much sarcasm in their own head but there was no one to hear or see him do it - except his Black Pearl, who was laughing at him, the git - so he didn't care.

At least Turner had only nodded at him and had been very, *very* careful to not look guilty or suspicious in any way. Naturally, Norrington was now all but hounding him with his eyes, having



once again decided that being pissed with Jack shouldn't stop his holy, self appointed mission of becoming Jack's shadow. Saud teen usually wouldn't mind and would instead have been delighted to once again get to talk to good ol' Norrington Junior, only he today had at the very least *two* additional unwanted shadows in the forms of Frederico - always Frederico, damn him - and most often Tia Dalma, although almost everyone from the core crew made shifts and took turns.

The Captain was ready to maul them by mid morning.

It was just one freaking nightmare! It's not though as he was *dying*! Although he guessed he could see where they were coming from, seeing as they had just a week ago sprung him free from the Locker in the first place, so he could just forgive them a little their paranoia. But just a little as they were all being so *bloody annoying*. He swore not even his overprotective father would be making this much of a fuss about it. Or Armando and *gods* Armando always made a fuss when his 'little Sparrow' was in any way at all concerned. *Yes*, they were *that* bothersome. Go figure.

He actually *glowered* when Pintel went to open his mouth, no doubt about to say or ask something to do with last night, and he snapped it shut with a click, whistling innocently as he went back to Ragetti so they could actually get some work done. Frederico looked amused at this point but James was altering between glaring at everyone with that fierce Admirally look of his - must have picked it up from his father, although his was slightly more impressive; bravo, Jamie! - and that just wanted to make Jack pout. But if he *pouted* instead of *growled*, they would start all over again. And damn Gibbs, he actually looked ready to actually dare say something. '*Evasive maneuvers!*'

"Mr Gibbs."

"Aye, Capt'n?" It was by now second nature for Gibbs to almost stand to attention when called upon by Jack. He didn't even think about it and with Norrington and Sanchez - two military men no matter how you look at them or what they might be wearing - there, he even threw in a half decent salute. Jack arched an eyebrow.

"What have you to say for your most recent actions?"

"Capt'n?" Good. Keep him confused.

"There has been an utter lack of discipline on my ship. Why is that, sir? Why is that?" The words came from his mouth as soon as his giggling Missy whispered them in his ear and he didn't understand the look Gibbs was giving him but James looked to be between snorting at them and frowning in worry. Frederico didn't look like the words meant anything to him, but the core crew of the Black Pearl looked real worried as well.

"Jack? Are ye alright?" Joshamee asked uncertainly, unnerved by the same questions that he'd been asked when they had found Jack in the Locker. He was as confused by them now as he was then, since everyone seemed to be doing their jobs diligently.

"Of course I'm alright. I'm Captain Jack Sparrow." He replied with a flourish bow before leveling flat, unimpressed eyes on the group. "Or do I need to remind you of that again by fighting ghosts. *Again.*" It was not a question. It was a challenge, a gauntlet thrown and waiting for it to be picked up or turned down. He arched an eyebrow to further make his point and watched as Gibbs winced while the others shuffled on their feet. "Or maybe something more drastic is needed? *Triangular*, perhaps?"

That got the reaction he wanted from Frederico. He flinched and dutifully nodded to his Captain in order to excuse himself before scurrying away across the deck and down below. Gibbs actually

flinched back before turning around to shout orders. The crew complied but they kept darting curious glances Jack's way. When he lazily lifted his other eyebrow to join the first, the scrambled to get it all done. Good. The busier they are, the better for Jack since they won't be trying to awkwardly ask any unnecessary and uncomfortable questions. Tia Dalma sent him a pointed look that he ignored, just like the glances Gibbs and Will kept sending his way, respectively. James made himself busy on the quarterdeck, but Sparrow didn't mind. He would rather that whatever it was that James was pissed about be resolved like this than having to apologize like a misbehaved child. All's good and well, for now. At least on that front.

Jack knew he should have felt far more uneasy around the crew than he actually was. As he had realized this morning, he wasn't exactly surrounded by the most trustworthy and loyal of blokes and ladies. Even with his Pearl whispering to him all the going ons of the ship, that didn't mean he could act if they were to plan a mutiny. He could only hope they don't do anything ... *stupid* until they are closer to Shipwreck Cove. God help them, there and then, if they try something. They would be well within Shipwreck Island's Watch and the Black Pearl was, apparently, a very distinguishable and famous pirate ship, known to be Jack Sparrow's. He didn't think Davy Jones would be of much help if his Da sets out on a warpath. Or, worse yet, Grandmama. *Calypso* won't be enough against Grandmama.

The rest of the day went rather peacefully by, the Black Pearl sailing perfectly through the waves like the queen of the sea that she was. Well, the queen of the Caribbean at the very least, although Jack doubted there was a ship that could match his lady love. She purred and shivered under his every tender touch and preened under every praise, going faster and faster without any added aid from the wind overhead or the currents down below. The newer crew were all watching it, dumbfounded and almost as superstitious as Gibbs, not believing what their eyes and experience was telling them. It was not possible for a normal ship to move this fast. Only cursed or magic ships can move this fast!

The Pearl slowed down around three hours after noon, when Jack finally handed over the helm to Mr Cotton and his parrot in the behest of Norrington to get some rest. The man scurried off to get him the lunch Tia Dalma had prepared but Jack had skipped out on - he was rather skinny, although not in a sickly way, just very slim - while the Captain contemplated the heat. He looked down at the no doubt blissfully cool blue waters and mourned that he could not jump in for a little swim. The ship was moving too fast even for a practiced swimmer like him to keep up and even with a line there, it was still too risky. She might unintentionally pull him under and he'd rather not inspect the barnacles no doubt already there on her hull. He should probably have that looked at, though. No need to carry around all those sea creatures if they could make a good soup. Better do it before the Pearl gets grumpy.

He still really wanted to swim. It was a really hot day in the Caribbean and he'd really, *really* like to cool off.

*"Hold my fin and let the feeling settle in*

*Come with me for a quick swim*

*In this great Ocean*

*You'll never return, you'll never return."*

The whisper in the wind snapped his head up and he jerked around. The crew, seeing his strange reaction, followed his gaze and shouts of panic and fear echoed along the ship. For there on the railing, not two feet away from the young Captain, seductively lounged a beautiful woman with long, long blond hair in an elaborate style, her bosom hidden only by the golden locks, some of the

shorter ones falling into her angelic face and eyes like twinkling sapphires. Her long arms were supporting her head as she leaned on the railing, hands cupping her face, out of their sight from the waist down. She had a single hair pin that must have once belonged to some noble lady that had been on some unlucky ship dragged to the depths by this very creature of beauty and terror. The only other decorative jewelry on her was a simple necklace of blue beads, seemingly glowing where water still clung to them, one missing and replaced by a pearl, not quite all the way to black but close. As symbolism, as to where her loyalties lie. Judging by that one piece of treasure on her, she had kept in touch. And she *still* had a crush on him, judging her beaming little smile and complete ignorance of the other pretty men on deck.

*"My heart's been pierced by Cupid*

*I resent all glittering gold*

*There's nothing that can console me*

*But my jolly, sailor bold."*

The sound of drawn swords and cocked guns and a wooden plate hitting the blackened wooden planks of the deck - so James was back, it would seem - drew Jack's attention away from the singing, happy girl to whirl around in time to see Lee preparing to fire. "Mermaid! Kill her! If you value your lives, kill her now!"

"No!" Sparrow yelled as he sprang forwards and shielded the mermaid from view with his own body, arms spread wide to the side as he stood in front of her, facing his crew. "Don't you *dare* touch her!" He ignored her wandering hands as she hugged him from behind, chest to his back, purring. The Black Pearl shuddered under him in distaste but the blond ignored the ship, enjoying the closeness after so many years apart. "Anyone who harms her will answer to me, do you hear me you worthless bilge rats?! You'll answer to *me*."

"Get out of my way, boy, or I will shoot you too."

"*No*."

"Jack, that be a mermaid and a hungry one if she be singin'." Barbossa tried to reason, eying the pale hands fondling Sparrow's chest happily, completely ignoring the rest. "Don't make me shoot ya after just gettin' ya back from th' Locker."

"Oh, I *dare* you to do it. See what will happen. Even if you *do* manage to get to Shipwreck Cove, you won't be any safer there." Jack threatened right back, black eyes glaring into ice blue ones. "Besides, she's not hungry. If she were, she'd be singing long and loud enough for you all to hear her and fall under her spell. And if she were hungry, she'd be hunting and mermaids always hunt in at the *very* least groups of three. She's here alone."

"Actually, Jack." The mermaid finally spoke up, her voice soft and seductive by nature as she peered at him from over his shoulder. "The others are here, too. They all wanted to see you." A pout. "We missed you. *I* missed years, Jack. Seven years. It's not polite to keep a lady waiting that long." She seemed to finally take in his appearance and confused brows furrowed over pretty, pretty eyes. "How come you look so young again? Did you go to the Fountain of Youth? You know you could have just asked me to bring you there and give you a tear."

"Actually, Lucia, I'm fresh out of the Locker." The pirate replied, turning around to face her with a last warning look at the crew. "This was the only way for me not to go completely mad. Now, from what I understand, I was already mad but not *completely* mad, so that was a saving grace. But

I *would* have gone utterly, completely and irrevocably mad had I not been ... this." He pointed at his rejuvenated body with a hand while the other stopped the mermaid's, Lucia's, hand from groping him. He was already being gawked at for being so friendly with a mermaid. No need to tell the rest of the story and her childish, naive, innocent, sweet huge crush on him. He looked at her then. She was no longer a child, nor naive and she was far from innocent, judging by her wandering hands and her age. She must have already been an end to many a men, sailors and merchants alike. But she was still sweet - at least with him - and she *still* had a crush on him. Or had it developed deeper?

She must have been reading his thoughts somehow - not even he knew whether mermaids could actually do that or not, despite being all friendly like with the lot of them - because she smiled bitterly and snuggled up against him. Jack had to blush at the move when warm, soft breasts pressed against him. He swore he heard a jealous exclamation somewhere behind him, a bemoaning of a lonely fate, a groan and some other noises he didn't bother identifying as he was too taken aback by what Lucia said right next to his ear.

"Had I known he would have stolen you like that, I would have never left you with that stupid Spaniard." And yes, Jack was pretty sure her pout was more than audible. You could *feel* it in your very bones.

He blushed as red as a cherry. "W-what!?" Did he just *squeak*?!

"He stole my Jack!" Lucia complained, wrapping surprisingly strong arms around him and dragging his face into her bosom. "I could have had you all to myself, not share you with my sisters and you would have lived with me forever. But I left you with those stupid, foolish Spanish and that idiot Spaniard stole and then stomped all over your heart. *Not fair*~! I would have treated you better." She looked up at him thoughtfully. "Though, you *could* come with me now, right? He's good and dead and I'm not a little girl anymore. Although, really, Jack, what is eight years of an age gap? You humans don't mind it, why should immortal creatures like merpeople consider it too much?"

"My answer is the same as before, bubbles," Jack told her gently even as he stroked the Pearl's railing to calm her down. She was almost homicidal with rage at the mermaid. Lucia smiled at the old nickname, both sad and happy, but she let him go when he continued and gently extracted himself from her arms. "And it was that way even before we saw the Spanish galleon. It's not him and it's not the age gap. Or the mortality-immortality thing. I told you all I need to be happy is my ship and there was no way then as there is no way now that I'd leave her even for my love of the sea. *And*," he cut her off when the woman went to speak. "Don't you *dare* suggest taking her to the bottom of the sea. You're not a child anymore. Besides, I'm kind of needed here." He gestured around to indicate the world above the waves. "Although I *could* use some of your help, bubbles."

"Of course," the mermaid replied immediately, suddenly somber. "You have saved me. I owe you my life."

"I somehow rather doubt it that you still owe me." Sparrow countered half jokingly, a finger gently poking the blackish pearl on her blue necklace. "Seems we've met up in the years I don't remember and I think you more than made up for me saving your life by you saving mine a dozen times over."

Lucia smiled, touching the pearl with a faint blush. "Yes, we've met again. We had to haul you a pair of sea turtles for you to leave that wretched island, some thirteen years ago and you told me about what happened to you since that night. Rene, Cory and I accompanied you until a passing ship of rum smugglers picked you up. You said you didn't want a repeat of New Guinea." She

pouted while Will, Barbossa, Elizabeth, Gibbs and about everyone else who had ever heard about Jack's miraculous escape from that spit of land forgotten about by even god gawked, eyes nearly popping out and mouths on the deck.

"You dragged me from the Victory in New Guinea to Hispaniola where Armando picked me up, you were exhausted, I was starving and dehydrated and shivering and you could barely move on your own. Rina and Carol had to drag *you* to your underwater homes when they finally found you just when I was being carried off to the ship's surgeon." Jack gave her a reproachful look. "You were *six*. It's a bloody miracle either of us survived."

"You didn't want to become a merman and I wasn't going to leave my rescuer to the fishes, was I?" Was Lucia's defense and they pouted at each other. The rest of the crew kind of just stared. Frederico, though, was wondering how they could have missed three half-fish women in the waters. Then again, the Capitán had instantly been taken in by the pirate boy they had fished out to care much for any other fishes. And since he was giving orders, the rest were a bit too busy and a bit too curious to look.

"I wasn't going to leave the Wench."

"And you didn't want to leave the Pearl then, either, but she had left you." The blond complained and said ship swayed alarmingly, almost knocking her right off the railing had she not reached out for Jack to steady herself. The black sails rustled threateningly and Jack wisely made Lucia let go. "Anyway, what is it that you wanted?"

"I'd like to call in my favor with the sirens." Sparrow told her in all seriousness but she just gawked at him.

"Are you mad?! What business could you possibly have with *them*?! They serve Davy Jones, for goodness sake, and *he* thinks you're dead!" She frowned at him suspiciously. "And what favor?"

"Let's just say that I at one time had the opportunity to kill them and didn't. As for my business with them, well ... Let's say I need some leverage. Sirens are more warriors than you merfolk are. And scarier. And there's the problem that their boss is under the control of another."

"They won't turn on him even if that's true."

"I won't ask them to. I'm *asking* that they keep a low profile. Stay away. Jones won't include them unless the one who's controlling him asks, so it would be for the best that they just stay put for a while."

Lucia looked uneasy with the topic. "Jack, they kind of personally hate you, if what the others say is true."

"Of course they hate me. I chose Calypso's side and was even immune to their song! I could have killed them if I wanted to and I guess that they took it as an insult that I didn't. As though it were a humiliation casted upon someone to save their life." Jack looked bewildered by the very idea.

The mermaid grimaced. "Please don't tell me all of this is *still* that ages old lovers' spat."

"I could but consider it a great possibility that I'd be lying."

"Idiots."

"Aye."

"You're an idiot, too, Jack."

"Idiocy and genius are two sides of the same coin."

"That's madness, not idiocy."

"Nah, madness is the edge in the middle."

Lucia snorted and shook her head. She studied Jack for a long moment before her eyes strayed to the rest of the crew. They shifted uncomfortably under his scrutiny and impossibly blue eyes before they returned to the eccentric pirate. She sighed, worry making her look weary. "Fine, Jack. I'll get the message along. But they won't be happy."

"Ask for Regina. She'll listen."

"You know the queen of all sea creatures by *name*?" From the sounds of it, that was quite a big deal. The other humans turned to look at Jack with curiosity. This was a story they'll be asking for, that was certain.

Jack grinned. "What can I say, luv? I'm Captain Jack Sparrow."

## Chapter 13

"So, Jack," Elizabeth began that night at dinner when Jack, for the first time since that first night, joined the crew for their evening meal instead of stargazing and humming songs to himself at the helm. Said man looked up from his turkey jerky and bread to regard her with expectant black eyes and Swann barely held in her full excitement. "*Mermaids?*"

"Aye, and sirens, too." He replied when he swallowed while one (maybe former by now) Lieutenant Philip Gillete choked on his drink. "What about them?"

"Do they jump on decks of pretty ships and warn sailors of cursed pirates often?" She continued innocently while Gillete tried to regain his breathe, glaring at her through teary eyes.

"Wretch!"

"Not unless you're name is Jack and you have one of these," he paused in his eating to show off the blue bead, the brightest thing in his collection beside the little string on his bandanna with a coin at the end. "But the truth is that I'm the only sailor who actually has one of these, so, yeah ... Everyone else is fair game."

"What *is* that, anyway?" Elizabeth asked curiously, eying the bead. It really was one of the prettiest things she'd seen and she was a Governor's daughter, used to luxury and glamor. She'd seen all kinds of jewelery yet this was the only jewel or treasure she didn't see anywhere else but in Jack's hair until today, around that mermaid's neck. "It must be something special."

"It is, luv. It's a crystallized mermaid's tear, the key to *immortality*." Sparrow revealed, leaning closer, his eyes catching the light of the lanterns and getting a mysterious glow to them. The others - except Tia Dalma, who knew this well; she had tried bargaining with him for it once but Jack had refused to even consider it, no matter what she offered - leaned closer as well, all eyes raptly fixated on the blue bead now. "Every mermaid get's only one of her own but she inherits the ones of her mother and grandmother and every other foremother before her. Those of particularly long lines have enough to make a necklace, like sweet little Lucia did. *But*," he leaned back, well away from any grubby, greedy fingers that might try to take the bead from his hair. "There is a catch. The tears, to be used, must be given freely. And a mermaid can give away only her own tear. Those who came before her had had their chance to give the their tear away. Once a mermaid reaches sixteen summers, the other tears are given to her. As for her own ... She has a human life time until the birth of the next mermaid to find someone to gift the tear to. And that's where the catch is. Since a mermaid can give away only *one* crystallized tear," he leaned in again and pitched his voice lower, grabbing even more of their completely snagged attention greedily. "It is to be given only to he whom she believes she can give her heart to, whom she can gift *immortality* to spend forever with. A *mate*, if you will. True love."

"You mean to say ... Lucia is in love with you?" Out of all of the things Jack had just said, Elizabeth was stuck on that. The men around her turned to look at her incredulously while Tia Dalma looked away. Touchy, she always was, when love was brought up in conversation. His words' spell on them broken, Jack once again leaned away from the crew, quickly finished his dinner and set the dish aside so he can comfortably continue with the story telling.

"Of course not. She's just got a little girl's crush on an older boy. Although she *is* older than me at the moment." He frowned to himself before shrugging it off. "I was just the first human, a first *man* to treat her kindly so she just grew to like me, I guess. I was shocked when she insisted I take her tear, especially after what she told me it meant. I tried refusing, saying she'll find a better

mate in the future, someone who will accept what she was offering, but she was a stubborn little six year old and insisted that, if she had to, she will never again turn back into her mermaid form and sail with me as my wife. That was, like, three years ago to *me* so it was quite a shock to see her all grown up."

"Havin' secon' thoughts, Jack?" Hector teased the teen, who just chuckled. If you listened carefully, you could tell it was more than a little forced. There was very little humor behind it. Gibbs glared at Barbossa even though he knew the older Pirate Lord had no idea what Jack was going through while Frederico just handed his ration of rum to the young Captain. James was watching him worriedly so Jack took a long drink from the tankard before focusing back on the conversation.

"I said I'd hold on to it for her until she found someone to love and who would love her in turn, but I guess she never did. Stubborn little bubbles." He smiled fondly, a finger playing with the crystal.

"How did you two even meet?" The curious young woman asked, contemplating who she was more likely to get to leave Jack's side, at least for the story. She could try James but Theodor seemed to already be doing the puppy dog eyes on him and maybe Frederico was as much of a courteous gentleman? She could only hope. She'd *really* like to hear this story.

Jack hummed, leaning a bit to the side until he was resting against Norrington's shoulder, much to the Navy man's surprise. That ruled out asking James to give up his spot. Groves and Elizabeth were equally disappointed. James' face was a rather lovely pink.

Frederico narrowed his eyes in thought.

"Well, let's see. I was fifteen and sailing on the Wicked Wench as a cabin boy, under Captain Morgan. Good man, he was. May his soul rest in piece." Jack for once didn't mock the whole religious aspect of that wording and just continued on, fiddling with his Compass as he continued the story. Anyway, one day, in New Guinea, where we were making port during a nasty summer storm, there were several English Navy ships docked near us pirates as well. Any port in a storm, aye? Well, it's the truth."

He looked each former Navy officer in the eye, daring them to contradict him. Frederico raised his hands as though in surrender, Groves nodded in agreement, Gillete huffed but didn't say anything and James just stayed quiet, arching an eyebrow at the teen. Satisfied that no one was arguing a logical point, Sparrow went back to his story.

"Well, being the curious lad that I am, I couldn't help but go closer to the ship, inspect her, if you will. The Wench was far from happy about me eying another ship but I had to make sure a ship as big as that English vessel could not catch up to us when the storm passes and we are at open sea. Anyway, I heard crying coming from one of the portholes, conveniently close to one of the lines tying the ship to the docks. Real sloppy work, if you ask me, since no one was on watch either on deck or down at the docks. As you can guess, I went to investigate." Jack's hands, as they were wont to, were a blur of moving and fluttering fingers as he told his tale, enchanting his audience with them as much as he did with his eyes and his words. "Once I was level with the porthole, I found little Lucia, six years old, half dunked into some barrel, hands tied above her head, crying her little eyes out. She looked bloody tired and terrified and she flinched away from me when I reached up to untie her. Unfortunately," he sighed in exasperation. "That was when one of the more competent men came along and saw me with the mermaid. He knocked me out and tied me next to her barrel. In the morning, they set sail with the tide despite the weather, in a hurry."

"In a hurry to where?" Theodor asked in barely a whisper, eyes wide with excitement. Jack smiled mysteriously and reached into his coat, where he had taken to secretly carrying the Mao Kun Map since he found it aboard the Black Pearl and realized no one knew it was still there, shocking his



audience now as he took it out, spread it and turned the circles until they formed the image of Cube with a silver cup above it, an angel of heaven and an angel of death facing against each other over it.

"To the Fountain of Youth, mate. A race to immortality." He told his fascinated crowd, quickly snatching the Map back and hiding it in his coat again. He'll have to keep it in his chest now, lest they steal it. "I don't know all the details, but I do know that mermaids are needed in order for the Fountain to work. Lucia told me they wanted her tears, which was why they were taking me with them now. They had been torturing her for days on end but she healed and she didn't cry. Mermaids be too tough for that. They thought sorrow might be the case and, since I tried saving her, she might feel pity for me. They never realized how scared she was. They had captured her in the Pacific but were now in the Caribbean. You can just imagine the types of torture they had put her through. She hadn't cried until she was well alone so no one could collect her tears."

"You obviously escaped." Will offered when Jack fell into a furious silence, his fists clenched so hard they were almost as white as Will's used to be before he started sailing with Jack. It was rare to see Jack truly mad but he was obviously fond of Lucia. And she had been just a child! Who *wouldn't* be furious.

"Of course we did. One of the idiots had a letter opener on him, came down to read some secret missive - a spy for the French, he was. Anyway, while he was reading, I made some noise and he thought someone was coming, so he quickly stashed away the letter and knife, only he didn't secure him in his hidden inner pocket and they fell out in his rush. I managed to reach it after some maneuvering that I would not have been able to do had I not visited India that one time and I started cutting my ropes. I managed to free myself and Lucia just in time before the guards came down to check on us, threw her out through the porthole and followed after leaving the letter on one of the nearby crates. Don't know what they were alarmed about most: our escape or the enemy on the ship. Anyway, there was a great big confusion on the deck and they were getting ready to shoot me - Lucia had swam off immediately after I freed her - when something started dragging me down. I resisted, fearing what it might be and my fear only amused the Englishmen."

"Shows how great the Navy is," Ahmed looked tempted to spit at the curse but knew better than to do it on the ship and would rather not have to get up to do it overboard and miss a part of the story. "They do what they want and call it the law. And then they go calling pirates merciless and blackguards."

"There's no absolute good nor evil on either side, mate." Jack almost admonished, interrupting before any of the present (possibly or already former) Navy men could speak in defense of their beliefs and former jobs. "We're all just men, trying to survive by the strength of our backs and the sweat of our brows and the courage - or cowardice - of our hearts, depends on who you ask. Why do you think the sea goddess is so fond of us? We fight and accuse each other of being the bad guys and she right enjoys the show. She'd be bored as hell otherwise."

"An interestin' thought, Witty Jack." Tia Dalma threw in with wry amusement. "Wot makes ya think she like dem sailors at all?"

"Because she'd be lonely without them." Sparrow answered surely, holding her gaze, a thousand unspoken conversations passing between them. "She needs someone to worship her and only a true sailor worships the sea above all other gods. The Navy boys are all Christians, so of course it is pirates that she favors. Or she did, until they grew bold and stupid when they bound her in her bones. Idiotic, really. The sea is not to be bound or controlled. I agree with Barbossa that Calypso should be freed but I don't agree with the notion of further complicating the spat between her and Davy Jones. We should wait for the opportune moment."

"Ya speak as wisely as always, Witty Jack. Tia missed this side of ya."

"If I really ever stop speaking like this, I ask someone to put a bullet in my head."

"Don't make offers like that, Sparrow. You might regret them." James sardonically told him, cutting in on the strange conversation no one but Barbossa seemed to be quite following. "And there's far too many eager individuals who'd take you up on that offer, so be careful. You won't be able to talk yourself out of every single one."

Jack grinned. "But that's what I have my friends for, aye? And I have some pretty interesting friends."

"Not everyone will be afraid of a mermaid, Jack." Will pointed out but the Captain just snorted.

"Mermaids are not the strongest of my friends, or the scariest of my allies. Heavens help you if you decide to kill me."

"How did you end up on our ship?" The Spanish accented words cut off Elizabeth's and Will's intrigued would-be questions and they all turned to look at Frederico. He was staring intently at the teen, waiting for an answer, his face set in a determined expression that looked somewhere between a glare and a stern face.

Jack answered without waiting, guilt making him answer more than anything. "The thing dragging me bellow the waves ... It was Lucia. Since I saved her and showed her kindness, she was returning the favor. The English realized it was she who was dragging me down and tried to shoot us both, but she finally managed to pull be bellow and she kissed me before going deeper under the surface. After a while, she stopped kissing me and I started panicking, thinking she was surely going to kill me and eat me, but I wasn't suffocating and she didn't go deeper than a dozen meters. We swam like that for hours, she mostly dragging me in the currents and we at times surfaced to try and figure out where we were. It was in those instances that she offered the tear to me and tried to persuade me to become her mate. The only semblance of rest we found a day later, on some rocks in the middle of nowhere. We couldn't stay there since we were both hurting, exhausted, hungry and thirsty in my case, but we took a nap before we continued on. When we saw your ship, we were both ready to just ... collapse but Lucia refused to let me die. She made that final part of the journey, swimming under me to make me float closer to the ship. I was not very conscious of what was going on by that point but I *do* remember when she kissed my cheek, weaved the tear in my hair and swam away and I remember being carried by Armando to the surgeon. I remember catching a glimpse of two other mermaids, whom she had talked about - we had to talk in order to keep ourselves from panicking while we swam in the middle of nowhere; did you know that rivers Amazon and Nile have their own species of mermaids who actually walk on land most of their lives and don't bother with sinking other people's ships? I wonder if I ever went to investigate that? - pulling her away. When I woke up two days later, I had almost thought it a dream but I wasn't aboard the Wicked Wench and the same strange Spaniard who had carried me was dozing by my bed."

"The captain was very worried about you." Sanchez said by way of explaining, as though that said everything. To Jack, it did and he smiled sadly, opening the Compass to see it still pointing West. He closed it when the two ex Navy men on each of his sides leaned over to peer at it.

"I guess he was."

"So you have a way to immortality yet you seek Davy Jones heart to stab it?" Will asked in confusion and Jack's head snapped up, his hand moving in a blur to make a cutting motion before his throat, waving it left and right.

Norrington whipped around to glare at Turner. "You *told* him?!" He hissed angrily and the other realized what had happened, all of them turning to glare at the blacksmith. "When, exactly, have you found the *opportune moment* to tell him when we all specifically agreed that we *won't*?"

Jack snorted, straightening up so he was no longer leaning on the Admiral. "It's better if one of you told me instead of the Pearl doing so because I wouldn't be able to trust you at all. As it were, I already felt uneasy enough around you lot to call Lucia. Don't get any stupid ideas, since there are five mermaids trailing us. You try anything and they'll know. And they'll *act*." It was as much a threat as a warning and a promise. Seeing how fond Lucia is of him, Sparrow was probably doing them the favor of even telling them this instead of letting them find out the hard way.

"They won't be able t' follow us into the Cove, as it is fortified against magical beings making the Crossing by a strong magical barrier, and we're now only a few days away." Barbossa pointed out, taking up Jack's challenge. The teen snorted and Gibbs looked somewhere between rolling his eyes or wringing his hair out with stress and worry.

"Yes, I do hope one of you blokes will be stupid enough to break the Code by attacking a Pirate Lord in the Cove. Can't wait to see your faces when the Keeper lays in on you. Maybe he'll be merciful enough to just flog you to death instead of getting creative."

"It's not against the Code for another to challenge a Pirate Lord for his position."

"No, but it *is* strictly forbidden by the Code for it to be done in the proximity of Shipwreck Island, let alone within the Cove itself." The two Pirate Lords had all but forgotten about the rest who were now watching them avidly as they discussed the inner and outer workings of the Brethren Court.

"Says who?"

"Says the Code. Specifically, page seven, section five, subsection C3, sheet four-two-six, paragraph fourteen." He noticed all the stares he got, even Barbossa's dropped jaw and glared at them. "What?"

"Why do you ... know the Code in such detail?" Elizabeth asked hesitantly. She was pretty sure no judge or lawyer knew the *law* that good, in that much *detail*, although Elizabeth wasn't sure if Jack was bullshitting and pulling their leg or was he actually serious. It was hard to tell, really. Extremely hard to tell. The Jack she had grown accustomed to hid himself behind a mask but a mask had a pattern and you just need to figure it out to see beneath it. This Jack still hadn't developed that mask and that in itself hid him from pondering gazes. They didn't know how to deal with this Jack, the *real* Jack Sparrow and that was more than defense enough. When you didn't know anything about an unpredictable individual like Jack, you have no idea what to expect from him at all.

Jack's eyes flashed with a strange emotion but it was covered in seconds by a grin in Will's direction. "Every form of immortality has a price, whelp. Tearing out your own heart and serving on the Dutchman for eternity with only one day of shore leave every ten years, taking the years of another person in order to extend your own life, losing all feeling and all that makes you human, or never being able to leave the sea ever again. You see, merpeople who were once humans can't surface for a hundred years and after that, another hundred would be needed before they can set foot on land. I'd rather be free than immortal, mate. And being dependent of a Fountain to stay alive is pure imprisonment without the bars."

"So why not give the tear to someone else?" Ragetti asked, blinking at the de-aged Captain he had once betrayed.

"It wouldn't work. The crystallized tear of a mermaid works only when you crush this outer layer that looks like glass and *only* the one the mermaid gave it to can break it. And *only* if they *really* want to. Besides, anyone else who drinks it will die instantly. I'm the only human who had been given it and is still keeping it instead of using it right away." Jack shrugged with a grin. "I don't need it. But it's a memento and I gladly keep it with me at all times. Maybe, some day, Lucia will come and take it back when she finds someone to love."

"She already did, Witty Jack." Tia Dalma said as she stood up, taking her leave for the evening.

"She already did."

The man in question just looked down, no emotion on his face or in his voice. "I know." He excused himself from further questioning and went back to his cabin for some sleep.

It will hopefully be better than the last time he slept.

## Chapter 14

*There were guitars playing a cheery, fast paced melody in the back ground, laughter and cheers and the clapping of hands giving it the desired rhythm as he tried to follow it with his hands and feet. For all his savviness and his incredible fast learning that had kept him alive for this long, he was struggling with the right steps. In his humble opinion, remembering the right steps was harder than fencing footwork and if he got that wrong, he'd be dead. He missed another step and scowled as his 'mentor' laughed delightedly.*

*"I don't see why this is necessary," he grumbled under his breath, still glaring at the laughing older man. He was quite handsome, even though he had lost his right eye some time in the past, due to his chosen occupation. And he was nice enough but it wasn't because of him that he was making a fool of himself as he tried to learn the complicated, fast paced dance.*

*"Because, while you may speak like a Spaniard, if you cannot dance like a Spaniard, no one of Spanish blood will take you seriously, birdie." His 'teacher' said with a teasing smirk as he took hold of his hand and twirled him around before drawing him close to his chest and dipping him like a girl. The teen scowled up at him petulantly but he only laughed while the crew cheered and wolf whistled at them. They so enjoyed teasing their youngest companion, even though he more often than not join in on it. And, besides, this was perhaps the first time they'd seen him off balance. Usually he had them so off balance they feared their world was spinning due to his words, his hands and his hips. Dear Domini, those hips could move. With every roll of the waves, the hips rolled with them, too, enticing and distracting and ... Well. The Capitán was more simply minded than ever. It was good to see the teen a bit out of his element, as he usually caught on so fast to the rare few things that he didn't know or confused him they almost thought he was something other than human.*

*The teen frowned in thought as his dance partner brought him up straight again, allowing him to adjust his stance into the correct position. That would explain why Spanish pirates were so hard to negotiate with. Not even Captain Morgan could make a deal with them and he had never allowed his cabin boy anywhere near them, wary of what they might do to someone as pretty as him. Jack hated being called pretty, but he knew he was more pretty than he was handsome. At least for now. Maybe he'll grow into it. Grow a beard and a mustache, perhaps?*

*He was snapped out of his thoughts when his 'teacher' pinched his side. "Ow! That bloody hurts!"*

*"Then pay attention," the Spaniard clucked his tongue at him in disapproval, stomping his feet to signal the music to start again. The sensual melody began and Jack groaned. "Come now, birdie. You must learn."*

*"Lesaro, come on, mate. I'm tired and I'm obviously not built for this." Jack complained even as he followed Lesaro's instructions and steps with critical eyes, taking in the details and doing his best to mimic him correctly. "Let's just stop."*

*"Nonsense!" The Lieutenant almost boomed, picking up the pace with the music, watching as Jack repeated his movements and silently marveling how in only a couple of hours, the teen was already half way there to being a decent dancer. Five weeks ago, they have found this boy in the middle of the ocean, half dead from dehydration but still clinging on to life with a determination that was bordering on desperate. He had recovered relatively quickly, even though he had been unconscious for a while, and once he was up and about, he had proven himself to be a competent, skilled young sailor. And he had thus started worming his way into their hearts, altogether stealing the Capitán's within two weeks. At least he no longer took offense to being called 'birdie', 'Sparrow' or 'little*

*Sparrow' as he used to. "You are most definitely built for the fandango and you will look amazing doing the zambra and the flamenco. But you must first learn this, as it is easier."*

*"Why are you doing this to me? I thought you liked me!"*

*Lesaro ignored him and continued speaking even as they danced, watching in fascination how the lad's legs got every step right. So he was right. All he needed to do was distract the boy. The rest of the crew was ecstatic, cheering and whooping. He hoped they won't break Jack out of his little spell and that they'd have to start over. "Of course, we will have to pay extra close attention to the paso doble. You must learn to dance like a Spaniard, Gorrion."*

*"Why?!"*

*"So you can dance for the Capitán!" A man called from the watching crowd, the lot of them laughing delightedly when Jack turned an interesting shade of red yet didn't miss a beat in the dance that was slowly coming to a close.*

*"You must dance for Capitán!"*

*"His birthday is coming along! It will be a pretty present!"*

*"I'm going to kick you in the groin the next time we duel, Magda! Mark my words!" The teen growled, looking at him with a fierce glare even as he sidestepped Lesaro when it was required.*

*"You've lost the element of surprise!"*

*"Oh, I'll surprise you alright!"*

*The crew laughed in delight at their banter, cheering, chatting and making bets on whether or not Jack will actually do it and whether he'll succeed as the song slowly came to an end. Then an almost deafening applause had Jack's head snapping back to the dance and his partner, eyes going wide as he realized he hadn't stumbled once. He laughed, twirling around excitedly, delighted at having finally gotten the hang of it. Lesaro just smiled at him.*

*"You just needed to stop thinking about it and do it as you go. Don't you go through your life like that, Gorrion?"*

*"You're a crazy bastard, Lesaro." He responded but his words were fond and not malicious. He was as fond of the crew of the Silent Mary as they were of him. Just five weeks, barely more than a month. That's how long it had taken a pirate boy to befriend a galleon of Navy men. Although they didn't know that Jack was a pirate. He'll do all he can to make sure it stays like that.*

*"Perhaps, but I am the crazy bastard that will teach you to dance paso doble now. Music!"*

*"What?! No! I can't dance anymore! I'm too tired!" The teen protested, wide eyed in alarm and fear that the process will have to start all over again. "I won't be able to concentrate!" He started backing away, but Frederico and Moss caught him by the shoulders and held him in place. He immediately started struggling, demanding to be let go or he would make them all pay later in ways that will give them nightmares for life.*

*His yelling seemed fruitless as the crew joked and laughed at his expense until it finally had the most desired result.*

*"What is going on? What is this infernal ruckus?"*

*The sailors all froze, looking fearfully over their shoulders in the direction that the voice had come from, the entrance to the great cabin. There stood a tall, well dressed, authoritative man with an arched eyebrow and hands behind his back. They all bulked.*

*Jack beamed.*

*The Capitán was on the deck.*

*"Armando! My savior! Just in time! They were torturing me!" The crew winced at this. If there was one thing Capitán Armando Salazar was truly vulnerable and weak to, it had turned out to be to this very boy and the 'puppy dog eyes' he makes when he wants something. And Salazar always gives in, although sometimes a kiss is needed to ... persuade him to allow it.*

*The black haired Spaniard looked at his young new lover with an arched brow of interest before turning to his second in command. "Lieutenant Lesaro, what id the meaning of this?"*

*Being old friends by now, even though they were first and foremost Captain and Lieutenant, Lesaro had no fear to talk casually to his superior officer. "We were teaching young señor Gorrion to dance our national dances, starting with the fandango, which he mastered beautifully, might I add-*

*"Flattery will get you nowhere, hijo de puta!"*

*Lesaro ignored the screeched insult and continued as though Jack had not spoken. He also pretended to ignore the snickers from some of the men. If those same men were later assigned to tar the bilge deck, it was their very own fault. "So we were discussing teaching him our other dances as well, namely the zambra and the flamenco. We thought it would be a nice present from the crew to you for your birthday, Capitán."*

*Jack gulped as those dark brown eyes settled on him in peeked interest and he knew he was doomed when he saw them grow darker as they traced his body. He squirmed, wondering if he should have just went with little Lucia instead of landing himself in the lap of a predator. Quite literally, at times. Mostly times like these. Armando had not touched him beyond a few kisses after that night, two weeks ago, but Jack knew, he just knew that he would be devoured if Salazar was tempted so with such a provocative dance. Jack may not have tried them yet himself but he had seen all three dances the crew of the Silent Mary insisted he learn and he was just glad Lesaro was merciful enough to not mention-*

*"We, of course, have agreed that he must master the paso doble at the earliest convenience, but we wondered how to go about it. I am not the best dance in that dance, amigo."*

*On second thought, he should have just let those Englishmen shoot him in the water. It would have been a much more merciful fate. And he was going to make that son of a bitch pay. Oh, yes. Jack swore on the Wicked Wench that he was going to make him pay dearly. "Te destriparé como un credo. Pésimo bastardo. Canalla. Sinvergüenza. Bueno para nada hijo de puta. El traidor."*

*Salazar arched an amused eyebrow at his first Lieutenant. "It sounds like you have upset my little Sparrow." Jack colored beautifully at the possessive 'my'. That had added itself to his silly nickname just a couple of days ago. He was still not used to it. "I do not think he will baila with you anymore on this fine day, mi amigo. Nevertheless," he nodded at Frederico and Moss to release Jack and the young pirate immediately ran up to Salazar to hug him and give him a kiss on the cheek as thanks for the save. He yelped when an arm brought him almost impossibly closer to the older man. He stared up at him with wide eyes as Armando smirked at him. "I fully agree. Our little bird's dancing lessons must go on. Music," he commanded, his eyes never straying from*

*Jack's. "I will teach my little Sparrow how to paso doble."*

*The pirates mouth opened and out streamed the most foul of the Spanish language ever heard even as he let himself be led through the steps of the dance.*

00000

Jack was rubbing his eyes tiredly as he exited out onto the main deck from his cabin, bathed in the moonlight of the half moon that now accompanied them on their journey when he realized he was not alone. Norrington was sitting on the stairs leading to the quarterdeck and he looked as surprised to see the Captain as Sparrow was to see him. After a long, awkward moment of just staring at each other, they both snorted and James made space for Jack on the step he was sitting on and the teen gladly took the invitation. The night air was particularly chilly this night and he rather liked leaning on James. Sharing body heat was possibly the best excuse he could have.

"You got some serious issues if you can't sleep this often, James."

"Says the man whose dreams draw him to the deck almost every single night." The ex Commodore retorted immediately and the Pirate Lord chuckled.

"Aye, that be true enough. But, just remember, I have - in my own mind, at least - recently been the cause of a dear person's death and it still haunts me. Not to mention that I am currently surrounded by what are essentially utter strangers in the middle of a nasty situation. What's your excuse?"

James smiled sardonically and it was directed at himself. "I have relatively recently endangered the lives of some of the people on board, this very ship and her Captain, several times. I have essentially broken every vow and oath I have sworn and I have sailed to and fallen off of the World's End, sailed through the land of the dead, saved the man for whose death I am partially to be blamed for, seen that man reverted back to an almost innocent age and I have come to the realization that I have done very few things in my life that could be called purely good and right. That on top of realizing that the woman who I thought I loved had turned out to not be the person I had thought her to be and that the pirate I thought I knew, I actually knew nothing about. On top of realizing that I have spent an entire year delivering relatively innocent men to the noose for Lord Beckett only for them to be hanged without trail or an investigation. That, Captain, is my excuse."

Sparrow regarded the older - at least currently - man as Norrington went back to just ... staring at the black wooden planks of the deck. His Missy was nice enough to provide that James seemed to be staring at a spot he used to clean while he was a part of the Black Pearl's crew during Jack's apparently mad dash for Davy Jones' heart. If Will's story is to be trusted, that is. But the Pearl had nor whispered corrections in Jack's ears other than technical things about ropes and weaponry and time and supplies. Things that Will, for all that he'd become an accomplished sailor, had still not fully grasped, it would seem. Or had not reanalyzed the situation after he had the time to do it.

"That be as good an excuse as I've ever heard." He replied at length, watching Norrington's reaction to his words. Just a lite twitch at the 'excuse' part. Proud man, this one.

"Likewise," came the dry retort and they fell into a moment of silence before James broke it again. "How do you live with it? With ... this?" He waved vaguely at the ship and the open sea and Jack paused to think. There had to be a good wording of such an answer somewhere on his tongue, he was sure. He knew James meant piracy, especially if Tia Dalma or Gibbs told them anything about his past. William's actions spoke louder than words: once upon a time, a friend had had a hidden agenda and had betrayed him. Will had done the same but he had apologized where Fitzwilliam had never even considered it. So James was asking how a lad who hates piracy still condones it.



"I choose how to. I choose what to do, how to do it and why to do it. Not a very exciting or eye opening answer, I know, but you can find it if you just ask yourself: What rules do I follow? *Whose* rules? For there are only *two* rules out here, luv. What a man *can* do and what he *cannot*." He patted the blue clad shoulder lightly. "For example," he offered. " *Can* you live with it or can you *not*? It's up to you and when it all boils down to choices, you realize you have the power to control your own fate, to an extent. *Can* you do it?" *Or can you not* echoed around them even without being said. *Can* James L. Norrington, former Commodore and Admiral, condone to the very piracy he had hated so now that he was already here? Or can he not and will that lead to his destruction.

"For a teenager, you have an interesting view of the world."

"I can read, mate." He said as if that explained it all. Which it, in some ways, did. For those who can read often have a wider perspective to consider when they ponder life. And they tended to be a bit more opinionated than your average person who had never seen a letter in their life.

"I am not surprised. You *are* Captain Jack Sparrow."

"Aye, that I am."

"What sorts of books do pirates even read? Old diaries of rich, greedy, paranoid noblemen who had hidden their wealth instead of leaving it to their children and relatives? Journals of fellow pirates with hidden treasure in deserted islands?"

James found himself on the receiving end of a very reproachful and insulted look before Sparrow animatedly broke into one of his rants, this one the strangest of them all so far since it was about *books*. The hours flew them by as though they were seconds and they soon found themselves snoozing against each other as the sun playfully peeked over the horizon.

Neither man was aware of a pair of eyes observing them throughout the night.

## Chapter 15

The next day, trouble found them yet again, as it was wont to whenever Jack Sparrow was somehow involved. Thankfully, it wasn't in the form of the Empress and Sao Feng, nor was it military or privateers or, heavens forbid, Davy Jones. However, it *was* pirates again, flying flamboyantly under not only a pirate flag but also a Spanish flag that had both Frederico and Jack spitting out the foulest curses in said language that they could think of as the ship - a big one, twice as big as the Black Pearl; a former Navy ship by the looks of her - hoisted the jolly rodger in announcement of an attack.

Needless to say, the Caribbean Pirate Lord was nowhere near impressed that he had to deal with this sort of shit twice. A year is all that was needed for all respect of the Code to vanish along with Jack in the Caribbean. Sparrow was tempted to just pepper them with lead or let the mermaids have a decent meal out of them, but he knew better than to let that happen. His own crew will be uneasy from the sight, not to mention how sick he would feel himself. And an outright battle just won't do as the ship was *big*.

"She's almost as big as the Mary," Frederico, as though he were reading his thoughts, said to the Captain. "And she lays low in the water. The Wicked Wench had once already escaped a Spanish galleon. Surely escaping another won't be too big of an inconvenience for you."

"If she's anything like the Dauntless," James cut in, looking out at the ship that was indeed closer in size to his fallen ship than the one Frederico and Jack were talking about. "Then she has frontal cannon to attack any fleeing or charging ships and she's low in the water because of ammunition." He met Jack's and Sanchez's eyes individually and dipped his head at the Pirate Lord. "The Black Pearl could always outrun the Dauntless' cannons, especially with such favorable winds. I agree with Mr Sanchez. It is better to avoid a fight like this."

"Except we can't." Sparrow pursed his lips, glaring into the distance as he studied the ship, cataloging every detail of her and comparing it with what he knew. "I know this ship. It's the El Arquero, captained by Hugo Gomez, if I remember well. Armando told me his ship was named that way because it was designed with giant crossbows meant to sink into ships and stop them dead in their tracks. The reach of the crossbows is supposedly enough to cross a galleon five times and more, if the wind resistance isn't too great. And we're already in reach." He frowned in thought and turned to a grim faced Frederico. "Gomez was a Navy captain like Armando. Since when is he pirating about?"

"It turned out he had always been dealing under the table, as they say. He never held any loyalty to the Spanish throne and his entire crew were disguised pirates. He waited for the Capitán to be stationed elsewhere or outright taken care of before he acted openly on his betrayal." The Spaniard said in a voice tight with anger and a rush of it overwhelmed Jack for a quick instant before he reigned it in, overcome with a form of guilt. It was his doing, then, that Gomez could prey on pirates, merchants, messengers and Navy ships alike, since he had revealed his treachery only after the greatest threat to his kind was removed from the picture. Had he ever been found out as a traitor while Salazar and the Silent Mary still sailed the seas, he'd be dead in about a month or two.

He was snapped out of his current train of thought by a brilliant idea. A brilliant, risky idea but it couldn't be any more crazy than nearly sailing straight into the Devil's Triangle. That had been suicidal, this would be critical to his ship but she seemed as eager for action as the crew was, even though it was obvious that the ship was quite a bit bigger and better armed. But Jack had things that the other ship didn't, advantages he could use against them. But if he wanted his crazy plan to

work, they would need to time it all so precisely that no one would be allowed to be late for even a second.

The two Navy men next to him all but saluted when he straightened his back and started yelling orders in an authoritative voice, a habit from their former way of life that they had not yet rid themselves of. A habit of discipline that they shared with Gibbs, Groves, Gillete and two more lads of the new crew members they had picked up in their last port.

"Mr Cotton, a half turn to starboard and easy as she goes. Full sails, men! I don't want to feel a gust of wind on the deck! Everything is to go into the sails. We need to be a whole ten knots faster than them! Mr Gibbs, prepare the gunmen for a fire all on my signal. Mr Groves and Mr Gillete, distribute the shots for guns. Anything that can reach further than seventy feet. Anything under it is not to be loaded. Ahmed, up the the foremast, all the way to fore topsail, prepare knives and flaming torches. I think Lee will be the best to help you. Pelt them with everything that you've got. Anyone knowing how to use a crossbow, up the fore topmast. Shoot the bejesus out of them. And yes, I do mean snippers, too, so get up there, Gary. Will, James, grab the mirrors from my cabin, on the dresser. Pintel, Ragetti, you are to help them lift them all the way to the main topsail. Barbossa, I do believe you can guide the ladies to the big mirror in there. Help Tia Dalma and Elizabeth bring it to the forecandle deck! Frederico, help them out. That glass is not to shatter, do you understand me?! Lift the hatch and use the bars to protect it, I don't care, that mirror is *not to break!*"

The crew on the deck and bellow immediately jumped to do as they were told, scrambling around to fulfill their tasks. The mirror groups were extremely careful while the shooting group practically flew up the rigging to get in their positions. Jack disappeared into his cabin, reemerging mere few seconds later with his bow and two quills of arrows, running over to the railing and shouting to the water. The crew didn't even blink when the mermaids surfaced but Jack did more than blink.

"Wait until we give you the light signal from above to start signing. Do it from the other side of the ship. Please don't go devouring them while we're still here. You can have some of them after we're far enough away. Keep them occupied. It wouldn't be bad if you could distract them. Actually, better yet, please try to use that cool seaweed trick to pull their cannons into the water. That'd be the best, I think. Just be careful and thank you in advance."

The crew *did* stop for a moment to gawk when a red haired mermaid jumped out and onto the railing to kiss Jack's cheek before hopping back but someone - most probably Barbossa, as he tended to yell a lot - snapped at them to get back to work and they forgot all about their befuddling Captain for the moment and instead focused on the imminent threat.

"Full speed ahead, mates! We can't lose even a second!" Jack called as he turned away from the mermaids that had already swam off to do as asked. The teen was already scaling up to the crow's nest when he finally called out the final order for the crew down on the deck. "Hoist the colors! Steady as she goes! Give them hell!" A round of cheers broke out among the crew and the flag reached its honored place just as Jack reached Norrington and Turner, who were doing their best to balance the half body mirrors. On the forecandle deck, Elizabeth and Tia Dalma had the big mirror ready and were waiting for further instructions with Frederico and Barbossa assisting them in keeping the giant, well made, no doubt expensive mirror that Jack thought must be from turkey upright. Above them, on the lower part of the bowsprit, stood Marty with a big pistol that looked much too big for him but he handled it well, from what Jack could see. "Mr Gibbs! Send up the bag of goodies we took off of our unwanted friends from Singapore and be quick about it!"

"Aye aye, sir!"

Jack watched him hurry into the forecandle before looking up at the two waiting men with mirrors.

"James, catch the sun with your mirror while still pointing it at all. Will, you catch the light off of his mirror and send it down to the big one, savvy? You two need to get this right and do it on my command, no dillydallying or rushing. *Savvy?*" He stressed, giving them both a stern look before continuing up to the crow's nest just in time to see Gibbs had returned with the things he wanted and was tying it to one of the lines that would bring it up straight to the nest.

"Yes, but what will this accomplish, Jack? We need all hands on deck!" William questioned over the wind, trying to be heard as he and James watched their Captain accepting the bag that had been hoisted up by Pintel and Ragetti. A nod from Jack was all Gibbs needed to know they were no longer required there and that he should give them new stations. The old sailor then continued the basic battle preparations, greatly grateful for Theodor's and Philip's help as he no longer needed to be in three places at once. Gary was yelling things like "Yiiihaaa!" from his perch, Lee looked almost like he was meditating while he watched the fire and Ahmed was sharpening every last blade he had on his person.

"Trust me, whelp! It's an ancient Egyptian trick to intensify lightning! If done right, the ray of light that Lizzy and Tia will be sending into the crossbow sniper's eyes will be more than enough to blind them. And not just them, but everyone else on the forecastle deck and quarterdeck!" Jack pulled out some paper bombs from the bag and tied three on each of his arrows, using the rest to coat the head of the arrows before taking out some of the fireworks that had remained after Tai Hung and his men signaled a pick up back on the island. He prepared them separately and took out the last thing in the bag. A box of matches. He prepared everything before leaning over the crow's nest to peer down at the main deck, where everything seemed in order. "Mr Gibbs! Get the bombs ready! Make a big slingshot from that Egyptian cotton! It's almost as elastic as rubber! Two strongest men to hold it, two best shots to take turns aiming! Get to it!"

"Capt'n!" Marty called from the bowsprit, pointing a finger at where the crossbows were being readied. Jack looked up with a glare at the giant crossbows that would make a really big dent on his ship and glowered. She shuddered in excitement under his touch as he gave her a reassuring caress before both Captain and ship focused on the fight.

"LIGHT!" Jack yelled over the wind and James immediately arranged the mirror so it caught as much of the afternoon sunlight as it could while still being angled right at Will for it to reflect off of his mirror and down to the girls'. Judging by the commotion coming from the forefront and the very back of the ship, the crazy plan had worked and the two men could hear Elizabeth's incredulous laughter as the men on the forecastle deck and the quarterdeck of the El Arquero were blinded. Barbossa was yelling curses and incredulous praises at Sparrow from somewhere bellow as the opposing ship whirled off course as the pilot at the helm was as blinded as everyone else on the higher decks.

Seeing that the ship was still heading straight for them, Mr Cotton, as any sane pilot would do, started turning the helm, only to find it harder than usual as the stubborn ship went along with her insane Captain's crazy plan and Jack laughed. "Steady as she goes, Mr Cotton! Keep on course!" He called to the mute man before hooking an arrow in place and taking aim. The first arrow hit straight into one of the gunpowder barrels on the main deck and a huge explosion rocked the Spanish ship. Taking it as his cue, Ahmed let Lee set his daggers and throwing knives on fire before he aimed as farthest and best as he could, since the two ships were still very far away and facing each other head on instead of side to side. Jack cocked another arrow, this one with the tip on fire and aimed for the main sail.

It went up in flames as though it had been washed in rum and utter panic started spreading on the El Arquero. Finally, the first answering fire came in the form of half of the ship's cannons starting a volley, but only the cannons in the back could fire, the front ones all plugged with that strange

sticky seaweed Jack had seen mermaids use to disarm opponents or drag them into the deep without getting too close. One of the stuffed cannons added another explosion and a huge hole in the upper hull of the ship. Even as he prepared another flaming arrow aimed for the flying jib and jib, Jack heard Elizabeth, ever the opportunist, telling the bombing crew to hurl as many bombs as they could into the damaged hull to blow the ship up from the inside. He laughed as that plan worked, slowing the big galleon down even more as more and more of the sail caught fire - one of the yardarms had fallen off and almost killed a group of men, but it had cleanly fallen into the water, taking some of the burning linen with it.

The two ships were still heading too close to each other when Jack finally called to Cotton to start evasive maneuvers to distance the black ship from the Spaniards, still shooting at the sails. As they started distancing themselves, he called out one extra loud "FIRE!", which was echoed by Will and James, down to Gibbs and Barbossa and finally Elizabeth's "FIRE ALL!" And so the Black Pearl started returning fire to the still sputtering cannons of the El Arquero. When the mermaids started pulling the remaining cannons in the back of the ship into the sea, splintering and ripping a lot of wood in the process, they managed to drag into the water a sailor or two.

The cannonballs of the Black Pearl hit low and true, endangering the Spanish pirate ship to the point where there were holes nearly at water level in the hull. The Pearl's crew cheered as the opposing ship shuddered, slowing down even more as its most integral parts suffered such grave damage. Gary was hooting as he shot down the few men on the main deck of El Arquero that tried using similar maneuvers as the Pearl's crew and Jack looked down from his aiming when he heard Barbossa calling for boarding preparations.

"Keep in mind the Code!" He called from high above, shooting at another powder barrel. "Who falls behind is left behind! Full speed ahead! We have places to be, people, and we've still got a pursuit on our tail!"

The only acknowledgment his words got was another cheer as the pirates got hold of hooks and boarded the other ship, looking for booty and more provisions. Jack allowed James and Will to go down, yelling orders down to the deck for the mirrors to be carefully lowered or else he'd have them keelhailed. Elizabeth and Frederico, no longer needed for the mirror, gladly jumped into the fray, Tia Dalma left with securing the big mirror so it won't break. Her efforts were mute, as some lucky Spanish bastard from El Arquero shot it while trying to shoot the voodoo witch herself. If he got dragged into the sea by a bunch of pearl-white, rock shaped crabs, Jack didn't inform his men about it. He was a bit pissed that his mirror was destroyed. Damn it, he'll have to go back to Turkey to get another one now. Bloody idiot got what he deserved.

Jack nearly lost his balance when a shudder ran through the Pearl due to three shots landing true, although thankfully only the railing and the wall of the forecastle were damaged. Still, he was furious and indignant on his lady's behalf, so Jack took one of the fireworks that they had confiscated off of their Singapore would be mutineers and he lit it up. Placing it like an arrow in his bow, he fired it straight and true, and the firework landed into one of the remaining functioning cannons. The collision of fireworks with powder and cannonball all but made the cannon explode and the two unlucky bastards manning it had the unfortunate to be killed in the blast. Or fortune. Jack would have done *much* worse had they put another hole in his ship.

In another five minutes, only the aft of the ships were in alignment and Jack called out one last warning to the crew, watching them all swinging back to the Pearl. He counted heads and was revealed to see all of the core crew was back on the ship, James, Elizabeth and Will being some of the last ones to come back. He noticed in a slight panic that Frederico was not present, but he relaxed when he saw him swing back, carrying a man back with him. So the bloke hadn't changed, then. The man would have been left behind had Frederico not hauled him back. It took the Black

Pearl another ten minutes before the El Arquero was just a big smoking shape in the distance and the crew let out a victorious cheer, calls for alcohol, music and food already overwhelming the wind. It only got louder when their Captain finally climbed down from the crow's nest, the men picking the teen up and throwing him into the air above their heads, just to catch him when he fell down seconds later.

Jack couldn't help but laugh along with them, silently comparing this victory and the last one he had achieved. The Wicked Wench's crew had been in awe of him more than they had felt relieved to have escaped with their lives. They had given him offerings as though he were some heathen god or powerful sea spirit that had shown them mercy by sparing their lives and smiting their enemies. They had almost reverently called him 'Captain Jack Sparrow' and they had shown nothing but respect and the fondness born of years serving with him. The cabin boy had died in their eyes that day, a legend born out of the ashes. The feat he had made that day might as well deserve some of that treatment, but it had made Jack feel isolated from the men he had served with for a little over three years. He wondered if that awe ever abated until they went their separate ways or if it had stayed until their deaths.

These men saw a miracle worker, yes, but they were already used to the legend that was Captain Jack Sparrow. They had not blinked at the crazy orders he was giving them. They had just acted.

And as he listened to the mermaid song in the increasing distance, Jack wondered idly just what sort of adventures his older self had lived through.

## Chapter 16

They had lost six men in the fight, three of them dying on the El Arquero during the boarding and raid of the losing ship, one dying from being knocked overboard during a cannonball attack and two being shot down by the pirates on the other ship as they had been side to side, passing and firing on each other. The damage to the Black Pearl could barely be called any real damage at all, but Jack would rather stop at any available port and see it all fixed. The temporary repairs were, well, temporary and while Jack held full confidence in his skills to safely guide them through the Crossing and into Shipwreck Cove, he would rather not risk it. Not with his beloved ship.

The few wounded they had were currently being tended by Lee, who had turned out to be an accomplished doctor if disgraced doctor from one of China's temples or shrines and he had turned to piracy to make a living, and Tia Dalma. The rest were putting away the new cargo they had managed to acquire or helping in the sick bay or wherever help was needed. Everything was going rather smoothly as their fallen comrades whose bodies they still had with them.

Frederico had not returned alone when he had been almost late to board the Black Pearl before they left the Spanish pirates to their fate. He had brought a man back. In all that commotion, Jack hadn't seen clearly which man he had brought back but he had assumed it had been one of their own. Sanchez had instead brought before him none other than Hugo Gomez, the deserter captain of the traitorous El Arquero. Jack had stared at him in shock before a cold anger took him over and he had ordered the unconscious Spaniard to be put in the brig.

Now, an hour or so later, while the crew were preparing some thing or the other on the deck that they didn't want him to see, Jack had decided to come down and check on his fellow captain. Hugo had been stripped of all weaponry, hidden or otherwise, his coat was taken away and his affects were put in Jack's cabin for safe keeping. He had a gash on the side of his head and a big bump, probably a result of Frederico knocking his lights out in order to bring him aboard. He looked nothing like a dignified captain of the Navy as Armando had once described him, although Armando had been far from fond of him. He looked every bit the pirate that he was and Jack felt that cold anger swell in him again. He had sworn his oaths with Armando and yet he had celebrated his death. Jack felt he could truly hate him like he had never hated anyone before.

Gomez looked up when Jack appeared in front of his cell, a small, sardonic, humorless smile stretching across his lips. "So you are him. You are the great Capitán Salazar's only weakness, his doom. I can see why. Yours is a fatal kind of beauty, Jack Sparrow."

"Flattery won't be getting you anywhere, mate, but further into Frederico's bad books." Said Captain replied coolly, eyes watching on high alert every move Gomez might make. "I hear you deserted as soon as Salazar's death was confirmed." He did his best not to show any emotion as he said this, not looking away from Gomez's gray eyes. "You're worse than a pirate."

"I *am* a pirate, Sparrow. You cannot be worse off than that." Hugo drawled, talking with the teen as though he were the superior one in this situation.

"You see, that's where you're wrong. *You*, and a few others I am sure have, have shown that there are some things far worse than turning pirate. It's turning traitor. It's not following any code but your own."

"Ah, yes, I've heard of the so called Code." The older man sneered, glaring at the Pirate Lord of the Caribbean. "I've been at this for years and I have yet to meet the rumored about consequences."

"Don't worry, you've got time. Not that the Keeper or his men would waste *their* time on someone as insignificant as you." Jack told him with a razor sharp smile, his eyes so unnaturally cold that Hugo flinched away from him when the younger man stepped closer to the bars. "But justice must be served and I just learned you've been haunting the Caribbean for the last few years. That's my turf, mate. We don't need no keeper to deal with *you* when we have good ol' Jack."

"I am not under your jurisdiction, boy!" The Spaniard snapped, daring to almost push his face against the cold metal of the brig so he could get into Sparrow's face in an attempt to intimidate him. Jack didn't move away, nor did he flinch but if Hugo didn't tread carefully, Jack will gladly pepper him with lead as his hands was already resting on his pistol. One wrong move and Hugo will have much more to worry about than his meager head wound. "I am a privateer, not a pirate. You have no right by your demented Code to do anything to me but maybe maroon me on some island or make me walk the plank."

"Or I could just leave you alone with Frederico for a few hours. That might be better than deep-sixing or keelhauling you." Jack said offhandedly, eying the man up and down. A privateer, eh? Yes, the Code was pretty clear about them: they were not protected by it and they were as fair game as any other non-pirate ship. But he *was* right that Jack could not exact *justice*, so to say, on him even with his position as a Pirate Lord. Technically, not even the Keeper could, as Hugo was technically flying under a country's flag. "Don't tell me you deserted the Spanish Navy just to become on of their privateers." He challenged with an arched eyebrow and Gomez took the bait hook, line and sinker.

"Of course not. I use the flag to either mock *them* or to lure their merchants into a false state of security so I can more easily catch them. I sail for the English." Hugo even turned up his nose at him as he said it and Jack wondered if maybe Frederico had knocked a few screws loose when he had hit him.

"You disgust me, Hugo Sanchez. You the worst kind of traitor. If you're going to betray someone, do it cleanly and do it once. There is no need to mock them after you do it."

"Says the same man who stole the infamous El Matador Del Mar's *everything* and then turned *pirate*, the single thing he hated most in the world." Gomez smiled a nasty, chilling smile and Jack had the sudden urge to just *punch* the man as hard as he could. He should have let the mermaids do as they please. It would have been doing the world a great favor. "You are a cruel, cruel man, Jack Sparrow. For he had loved you, that much was known far and wide, and yet you had betrayed his heart by pretending to love him back before piercing his heart with a knife. You turned pirate and chose piracy over him. How much he must have suffered."

Jack snarled at the purred words as a hand boldly reached out to caress his face, reaching out his own hands to grab the lapels of Hugo's fancy shirt and tugging with well hidden strength. The Spaniard cried out when his head hit the metal of the bars, the headache he had been suffering from the earlier blow becoming unbearable. Jack kept him right against the bars, growling in his face like his Da's pooch did whenever someone tried to take the ring of keys from it.

"Unlike with most, Hugo Gomez, you filthy, despicable, traitorous, slimy, bastard son of a whore, I didn't get to *chose* piracy, as it has been in my blood long before you were even *aplan* in your great grandparent's thoughts. Not that I'd demote it now or ever. I've once made the mistake of thinking your lot was better than the pirates I grew up with, but I know better now. I've known better for *years*." He pushed the blighter away and took a deep breathe to calm himself down. He won't give Gomez the pleasure of seeing just how much he had gotten to him. Armando was still too fresh a wound for him to forgive anyone trying to manipulate him emotionally like this. "You've just confirmed it. I wish you luck, captain, because you will need it."



"Going to break your Code like you broke poor Salazar's heart, *little Sparrow*?" Hugo gulped when he suddenly found himself with a faceful of gun and furious black eyes flashing at him like coals of hell fire. *This* was the man who had put an end to the Butcher of the Sea. And Gomez would be the greatest liar this world has ever seen if he said he wasn't at least a *bit* afraid of him.

"Don't test me, bastard. *No mostraré misericordia a personas como tú. Pise con cuidado.*" Jack told him before turning around, heading for the stairs. He was too tempted to kill the bastard to hold back. "We'll be leaving you in our next port. Good luck, you'll need it." He left before he could really be so tempted to just pull the trigger and see an end to that man. He needed to calm down. He shouldn't let others get him this worked up or else the crew will lose any respect for him or try to mutiny. His ship was the fastest and a very pretty one, at that. Anyone would want her and Jack wasn't about to let them have her.

He took a deep breathe when he was about to exit onto the main deck, only for that breath to leave him in a shocked gasp at what greeted him.

"Surprise!" Elizabeth and Will exclaimed while the crew as a whole cheered for their Captain, who was staring in incredulity at the little feast and party the men had prepared for him while he had been exchanging insults with their prisoner. They had quite outdone themselves, he had to admit. The Pearl's decks resembled more a setting for a festival than a black pirate ship, the air was pregnant with the delicious aromas of the food Tia Dalma had prepared with a little help, especially from Ahmed, who knew quite a few exotic recipes from the Mediterranean. The lanterns were prepared to later be lit, as they still had a few hours until sunset, but they were there and it was going to be a very pretty sight with the stars overhead and the lanterns on the deck. The atmosphere was cheery despite the deaths they had suffered, but he guessed that had more to do with the exhilaration from their victory more than anything.

"What's all this?" Jack asked even as he ventured into the little crowd, being patted on the back or shoulder and Gary slyly pinching his butt when they were out of Frederico's line of sight. He slapped the man in an unknown mimicry of Scarlet and Gizzelle from Tortuga and the pirates hooted with laughter. Gary didn't mind, he was laughing with them as he put an arm around Sparrow.

"We thought our Captain deserved a tribute after such a victory today."

"Had it not been for you, we would have suffered a lot more damage and loss." Ahmed added, grinning at the teen as he held up a big, strange box with a leverage with a handle on the side to show it to him. "We had some interesting plunder, Captain." He put it on a gunpowder barrel and started spinning the handle. Jack knew what it was even before the music started playing.

"A party seemed the best way to celebrate." Gibbs said as he smiled at his young friend. "We got five more barrels of rum, Capt'n. If you'd do us the honor?"

The Pirate Lord of the Caribbean grinned, took the proffered tankard from James and moved into the middle of the crowd. He raised his rum and addressed them all. "Drinks all around! Let's get this party started!"

"Aye!" The crew cheered and they all immediately took a long gulp of their drink before the music even started. Soon enough, there was joking and horsing around, men telling stories or eating the food provided for the fiesta. Before anyone knew it, the music box was constantly playing and the dances started. Since it was a Spanish music box, most of the songs it played were Spanish and so they were mostly fast paced and cheery, perfect for a party. On the second repeat of the songs, when enough rum had been passed around for most of the crew to be tipsy and the lanterns to be lit, Frederico boldly stepped up to the Captain of the ship, interrupting his and Elizabeth's strange

banter about sea turtles and drawing the attention of the small group Gibbs, Tia Dalma and the youngest members of the Black Pearl's crew had made up. Gillete, who had no hopes of holding his liquor, was already swaying on his feet and flushed in the face, leaning against Groves, who had barely touched his drink, too focused on the conversation taking place. James was supporting Elizabeth's arguments with cold logic while Jack and Tia Dalma were using their greater experience and knowledge of the supernatural and the uncommon to support their own arguments. Will and Gibbs occasionally added something, as if taking points on who had a better argument for each 'round' as if it were a sports match.

The young Captain arched an eyebrow at the Spaniard, giving him his attention with that simple gesture. Sanchez kept a perfectly straight face as he did a small dip all too familiar to Jack just when the beginnings of a too familiar song started playing. The teen lost all color in the face and made hand gestures to signal an abortion and casement of movement but the Spaniard paid it no mind.

"*Me concedes éste baile, señor Gorrion?*" His smirk finally broke out onto his face when he snatched up the young man's hand and drew him closer as the distinguishable melody of the fandango started. Jack protested, screaming at the older man, demanding he be released even as his feet automatically started making the right steps. "Let us see how much of Lesaro's lessons have stuck, birdie."

"I'm going to kill you!" Jack yelled but let himself be led through the dance, picking up rhythm more through habit and learned movement than because he wanted to. "I'm going to tie you up and throw you overboard! This is treason, *mutiny*! You know I hate dancing!"

"Ah, but you do it so well," Frederico let him go to clap his hands in order to demonstrate to the crew what they should do before drawing the smaller man close again. The crew picked it up easily enough, Elizabeth leading them as she watched with excited and curious eyes the rapid movement of their feet as the two males danced. She was far too used to the stiff dances at court that the upper society practiced but these lively dances ... She grabbed Will and dragged him into the big circle the men had left for the dancer, the couple trying to mimic the two old friends, laughing and all their arguments completely forgotten for the time being. Barbossa was yelling protests as Tia Dalma plucked him away from the rum and his apples but he let her drag him out onto the 'dance floor'. Soon enough, Gary plucked a random man from the crew and they all started dancing and laughing, those not quite bold enough to dance cheering and whistling. No one could compete with the Spaniard and the youngest Pirate Lord but they were not painstakingly taught to dance such a fast paced dance. They were all still having fun right up until the song ended and a new one started.

Jack broke away from his previous partner and, now emboldened by drink, dance and the applause as he always had been on the Silent Mary, lifted his chin higher and fell firmly and confidently into the perfect flamenco stance. "Mr Gibbs, provide my guitar, if you will."

"Aye, sir," the core crew of the Black Pearl all exchanged curious glances. They had all seen Jack's guitar - a thing of beauty, really - and they had occasionally heard him stringing a few notes together before putting it away so he can't even glimpse it, but he had never let anyone touch it. Still, Joshamee did as he was told and brought the guitar in record time. By that time, the flamenco was half finished but Frederico played for the rest of the song, the guitar beautifully accenting the sound of Jack's precisely stomping feet as the teen danced out the seductive dance.

The zambra followed next and Jack had a target: the stiff and proper Admiral, who despite being a pirate, was still trying to act like a gentleman on a ball. Well, the zambra was a wild staccato dance and Jack had always, *always* loved doing the zambra, even though he would never admit it. He

loved watching someone's eyes tracing his every move, especially when he untucked his shirt and opened up his vest to show off his slim stomach. That got him quite a few wolfwhistles and James was gapping at him with a blush. Left completely on his own, since Gillete had followed his new found need for more rum and Groves had wandered off to listen to more pirate stories, Norrington was at the mercy - or the lack of, thereof - of Jack Sparrow as he twirled around the ex Commodore, laughing and seductive and tempting all rolled into one. Frederico watched it all happen as he continued playing the beautiful instrument, recognizing the moves and the look on the teen's face.

He smiled to himself, feeling something a lot like relief. This was the Jack he had always known, not the fake-happy young man that he had recognized in that bar in the Dutch town. A light had been missing from his eyes, a light Frederico was not sure was absent because of the events that the Pirate Lord remembered or the one he currently did not. Frederico knew that his Capitán would have rather seen his little Sparrow with someone else than him forever losing his light.

He wondered if Jack Sparrow will ever dance the paso doble for James Norrington as he continued playing the guitar.

## Chapter 17

### Chapter Notes

#### Davy Jones [Lyrics] by Fialeja

Some time after midnight, when half of the crew was already down for the count due to drunkenness or simply wishing to get an early night of sleep, the core crew of the Black Pearl found themselves on the quarterdeck, sitting around a rare metal bucket in which they had started a small fire, idly drinking or snacking on some leftover food while Jack strummed absentmindedly on the guitar. He had plucked it off of a shocked Frederico when he had tempted James onto the 'dance floor' for a round of, to the Spaniard's great shock, paso doble without prompt from anyone at all. Norritngton had stumbled through it but Jack had been laughing all the while, so Sanchez had seen it as a win and had left the deck. He'd rather not stay and find out how Jack will react when he realizes what he had done and what that might imply.

Jack had played on the guitar for hours on end, stopping only long enough to consume alarming amounts of rum, but after seeing him drink all that tequila, no one bothered trying to take away his drink. The crew had greatly enjoyed themselves, playing games and participating in dances, telling and listening to stories and competing in arm-wrestling - they were now terrified of Tia Dalma, who had beaten them all - before finally passing out on the deck or retiring to their hammocks bellow it. Philip was sleeping propped up against the mainmast with Pintel and Ragetti, but the rest of the core crew were awake, not counting the monkey and the parrot, who were also asleep in their owner's lap or shoulder respectively. There had been singing and dancing - James and Elizabeth had even managed to talk Jack into playing a few court dances as best as the pirate could on an instrument that was not meant for them - and lots and lots of drinking.

The party was now over, the ship was quiet save for the occasional snore from below and the sound of Jack's skilled fingers flying over the guitar with seemingly thoughtless grace. The friends all whispered to each other, Will and Elizabeth seemingly having worked everything out between them and Norrington having decided to not glare at Will for the night, instead conversing with Theodor and - surprisingly enough - Barbossa about some thing or another while Marty told Cotton about this one time in Tortuga. Jack was in a world of his own, his fingers absently playing snatches of songs and melodies from his youth that his Da was particularly fond of, or the more recent ones he had used to play aboard the Wicked Wench or on the Silent Mary when he was tapped on the shoulder.

Broken out of his thoughts, the Pirate Lord of the Caribbean looked up from where he had been staring at the fire, blinking away the sports of light that came as a result from staring into the flames, only to see that it was Tia Dalma that had wanted his attention. The dark beauty smiled at him as she leaned against her favorite pirate, a hand coming up to caress the wood of the guitar's neck.

"Would ya have a song fer ol' Tia Dalma, Witty Jack?" Said teen blinked at her before he understood what she was asking and eyed her suspiciously. Oh, he knew what she was asking for. They hadn't been friends for six years - at least, just in his head; there was a twenty years gap missing for him but as she was still fond of him even now, then they must have stayed relatively close over the two decades - for nothing, after all. She had taught him the song herself, when he

had first opened the locket she always wore around her neck or had close at hand but she usually hated the sound of it. Why would she want him to sing it now? "Please? Fer an old woman's weary heart."

Jack sighed, hating he could never deny a friend. His fingers immediately started stringing individual strings, brow arching when he noticed William's head snapping up, as though he recognized the melody. Interesting, since Tia Dalma had never let anyone else here this song besides Jack before. Jack filed that thought away for later as he continued complying to his friend's request.

*"Cruel and cold like winds on the sea  
Will you ever return to me  
Hear my voice sing with the tide  
My love will never die."*

Tia Dalma joined him in the gentle song with a surprisingly gentle, smooth and very beautiful voice, brimming with emotion that could not be faked or masked. Just like every time they had snag it together or apart, they got every note perfect and they were quite in tune with each other.

*"Over waves and deep in the blue  
I will give up my heart for you  
Ten long years I'll wait to go by  
My love will never die."*

The group was enchanted but a shiver ran down their spine when Jack picked up the pace and started strumming the guitar in an almost haunting mirror image of the beautiful melody, sounding lower and foreboding. Like a heathen spell.

*"Come, my love, be one with the sea  
Rule with me for eternity  
Drown all dreams so mercilessly  
And leave their souls to me."*

Gibbs was crossing himself as though the devil himself had descended upon them. The two darker skinned individuals looked like fey creatures of the night as the melody continued, their voices almost as addicting and as alluring as the mermaids' would be. James watched warily, yet as enchanted and drawn in as the others, as two humans seemingly transformed right before their eyes. A trick of the light, yes, but chilling all the same, especially since they knew just what was hiding out on the sea and bellow its surface.

*"Play the song you sang long ago  
And wherever the storm may blow  
You will find the key to my heart  
We'll never be apart."*

"I know this melody." Will murmured to Elizabet and she reacted as though as if she had just been snapped out of a trance.

"What? Where from?"

"I'm not sure, but I know it. I've heard it somewhere before, I swear it!" Even as they spoke to each other, the song seemed to have reached its climax as the beat had speed up and Jack's and Tia Dalma's voices were stronger than ever, all but challenging the forces of nature with their words.

*"Wild and strong you can't be contained  
Never bound nor ever chained  
Wounds you caused will never mend  
And you will never end!"*

Jack stopped playing his guitar at the same instance Tia Dalma opened her locket, the sweet, innocent sounds of the music box being the only background melody to their once again low and gentle voices, as if they were trying to sooth the forces they had challenged, put them to sleep, console them. It was almost a whisper, a promise of forever and not enough.

*"Cruel and cold like winds on the sea  
will you ever return to me  
Hear my voice sing with the tide  
Our love will never die."*

They sang together, Tia Dalma's voice fading out halfway through the last verse so only Jack's voice finished the haunting, heartbreaking song of a doomed love. Tia Dalma snapped her locket shut and scurried away with a barely audible "Thankee, Jack." They all watched her go with worry but they knew better than to go after her. She needed a moment alone, to herself, to her thoughts and they were all, except Jack, rather awkward around her. The only one who could really go to comfort her was the Captain of the Black Pearl, but the young man made no move to go after her, instead sighing and rubbing a hand over his eyes tiredly.

"What a way to end a perfectly beautiful evening." Sparrow cursed under his breathe as he put his guitar away and the other's couldn't help but silently agree. But before they could ask any questions - and, like always, they had a *lot* of them - a splashing sound surprised them, the thud that followed had them whirling around and wishing they had not put away their weapons for the party, especially when they saw an unfamiliar mermaid-like creature. Except she had almost claw-like hands, sharp, pointy teeth and elfin ears, though her appearance was no less beautiful than Lucia's or any of the five mermaids hat followed the Pearl because Jack had not felt safe with strangers.

"It is so, too, oh blessed with the song." The blue tailed, black haired, brown eyed woman said seductively as she beckoned Sparrow over. "Such a beautiful song, yet none dare nor are they allowed to utter it. No wonder you could never fall under our spell."

"Morveren," Jack greeted as he cautiously stood up and walked over to where the siren was sitting on the railing, eying his companions in the same manner Lucia had ignored them. Most of all, she studied Sparrow, but she lacked any fondness for him that the mermaids held in their gaze. "I do believe I asked for Regina, not that I am not pleased to see the woman who had tried to eat me and my friends when we were but wee brats or anything."

She snorted derisively at him, pushing her hair back over her shoulder and noticing how only a few men followed her movement. How odd. Two of them were almost immune. In love or already fancying someone else. She ignored that thought for now, for she knew it was not important. She had more interesting dealings with Jack Sparrow.

"You know we have as much hierarchy as you *humans* do." She practically sneered the word out, looking down her nose at them. "You cannot ask a simple mermaid to vouch you for a meeting with the mistress of all sea creatures without first at *least* speaking to a higher ranking siren."

"So you volunteered?"

"Let's say I was skeptical about Lucia's words. The girl is far too infatuated with you for us to take half of what she says about you seriously." Morveren answered, leaning closer to Sparrow when he

was a few feet away. "Although she seems to have been right. It indeed *is* an extension of that stupid lover's spat, especially your current condition. Your soul is troubled, Jack Sparrow."

"So we've met again?"

"Yes." The woman said mildly, almost boredly, inspecting her nails. "I traded you the Deep Sea Opal in exchange for a miniature stone head from the Easter Island, which turned out to be a *fake*." She hissed, making to snatch at him with her claws but he moved out of the way in the very last second. "I will kill you for such treachery."

"Pirate," was all Jack said, now understanding the strange little rock figurine he had found in the chest and why he had been compelled to place it in one of his many, many hidden pockets. He had no idea what it did or why it was so special, but if a siren wanted it so desperately as to trade something as precious as the Deep Sea Opal for it, it must be bloody well important. He'll have to ask Tia Dalma about it once she's in a better mood. "And I do believe that he who saves one of the merfolk and/or is offered a mermaid's tear is not to be attacked by another of the merpeople." He paused for a second, furrowing his brow. "Why was I even searching for the Opal?"

"Long story be that." Barbossa cut in, eying the familiar mermaid with distrust. He remembered that meeting well and he could still not believe Sparrow had had the guts to not only so casually talk with her but also cheat her out of an honest bargain. "Let's jus' say you needed it to get somethin' else fer the Keeper."

"Well, that explains bloody everything." He sighed before turning to the, once again, calm siren. "So, what says your council?"

"Regina already knew we must hide from this ... Beckett and sirens and mermaids alike have been ordered to stay in the deep until this is resolved." Morveren answered coolly, once again feigning disinterest in the conversation. Oh, she hated looking like a fool after he had tricked her but she admired how skilled he had become at getting what he wanted. This was a stage of Jack Sparrow that she did not know, however, but she had heard stories that this was perhaps when he had been at his deadliest. She'd rather not test it. "A terrible storm is coming for you, Jack Sparrow. Your past will catch up to you, sooner than you think. You'd better be prepared."

She made to leave but Jack stopped her, being bold and daring enough to grab her by the upper arm before she could jump off of the railing. "I wish to speak with Regina." It was more a demand than a question or a wish, an order. "There are things I'd like to discuss with her privately."

She smiled mockingly at him. "You have the means. Why don't you use them?" With that, she wrenched her arm free and escaped to the waves, purposefully splashing Jack with her tails before she was gone. The teen was not amused but he guessed he deserved that.

"What did she mean by that?" James asked as the pirate Captain returned to sit close by the fire, cursing scorned women and mermaids under his breathe as he tried to chase away the chill with the fire's warmth. Taking pity on him - and hoping it will be a sufficient enough bribe to get the truth out of the younger male - Norrington gave him his coat, grimacing at the state of it. If he ever returned to being an Admiral, he will need a new one.

"My Compass can show the way and Lucia's tear can turn me into a merman so I can survive in the depths that Regina resides in." The soaked male said with a sigh. "Getting an audience with her would be great. For example, we might know if the Kraken is still on the hunt or if it had returned to the waters of the deep. Maybe we could even get something that could alert us to its coming if it *does* start chasing us again."

"Davy Jones knows not that ye're alive, Sparrow. 'E won't be callin' for a hunt, that be certain." Hector said, his voice as somber as the mood. No one felt like partying anymore. Not when they were reminded that they were on the clock, that any moment now, the British Royal Navy, the East India Trading Company or, the worst, the Flying Dutchman could be upon them at any moment. Not when they were reminded they were all being hunted down to extinction, if Beckett had his way. "Not if 'e don't know ye're no longer in th' Locker. Not unless Beckett finds out."

"'Tis a right mess, it is. I leave you lot alone for five minutes and the whole world turns on its bloody head." Sparrow ran both hands over his face, half massaging his temple, half despairing at the situation he had found himself in. The truth of the matter was that he was scared. Scared of the world he had woken up in. Just a little over a week ago, he had been happily sailing on his untouched Wicked Wench with people he knew for a little over three years, whom he knew he could trust; he had known his family were alive and well and the biggest threat to his way of life had been eradicated and by his own hand, no less. The only worries and problems he had such a short time ago (for him and as far as he was concerned) were his nightmares and sorrow and the increasing need to go back and check out the Devil's Triangle. Even being told pretty much everything he needed to know about this situation, Jack still found that he was in way over his head and yet people still looked to him for directions. He, who was lost, was expected to lead and so he once again found himself in the unfavorable position where he must take care for the lives of others. He didn't know his new crew all that well, especially the strangers they had picked up in that little Dutch port, but he still felt he had failed them.

Jack Sparrow loved being a Captain, never doubt that. But at times he had felt it be too great a burden. Even as a child Captain of his modified fishing boat, he had had a small crew for whose lives he had to care for. Back then, for all that he knew of the sea and its legends, he had not taken everything as seriously as he should and they had all nearly died more than once. No wonder they had left him. On the Wicked Wench, he had more people to take into account. They were all experienced sailors and yet they've all accepted him as Captain and they expected him to lead them and lead them good. Maybe it didn't feel like a burden anymore as time passed, but right now, a month after he had had a hand in the death of someone he had very nearly given his whole heart to, someone who he had loved, he was not at all ready to face the Brethren Court. He had not seen them since the Caribbean's pirate's dozen ship fleet had sailed off to meet Salazar in battle, not even when his Da passed on his Piece of Eight to him. A week of being the Captain of his beloved Wench had finally convinces his father that his son had grown up and no longer needed his constant protection. Moreover, he had accepted that his son was a pirate worthy of such a high standing among their ilk and gad believed in him enough to entrust him with his place in the Brethren Court.

Jack knew he wasn't the best candidate. Far from it. If his Da had wanted to keep it in the family while doing right by their reputation, like past generations had done it since the very first meeting of the Brethren Court, he would have chosen Valerie, Jack's older cousin. She was a real pirate. When they were little, his Da had always lamented that his son wasn't more like his niece and Jack never forgot that. One of the reasons he ran away. He had always felt so ... unwanted, when his Da would talk like that. He knew he was a failure as a pirate, a disappointment, but it hurt to hear it come from his Da's lips. His Uncle Jack always tried to reassure him that his Da didn't think like that but Jack, with his rebellious streak and his rather low opinion on piracy, had known he would never fit in and that, if anyone found out from which clan he hailed, he would shame them. So he ran away, for his many, many reasons, only to disappoint his father again when he was captured by Lawrence Norrington and his nephew, Fitzwiliam P. Dalton III, who had fooled him into thinking they were friends. He had thought his Da would never come looking for such a worthless son, would never risk his Misty Lady or any of his other pretty ships for someone like Jack. And that had hurt and scared him more than knowing he was going to the gallows, thinking that the man



who sired and raised you, who you looked up to and who had protected you all your life might no longer care whether you're dead or alive. Only pride had stopped him from crying himself to sleep those three nights he spent in the Navy brig.

But his Da *had* come, guns and cannons blazing with all the rage of their bloodline, hot tempered and aimed at Lawrence for *daring* to even *think* about taking his only son from him. He had not taken Valerie with him to search for Jack, as he'd been doing that half year since Jack had ran away. He had taken his fleet and had ran after his son, only finally, *finally* finding him when Admiral Norrington had arrogantly boasted - in order to draw him in and his Da had known that and yet had came still - that he'd caught Jack.

When it was all over, his father had given him his ring, this magical ring he wore on his finger still, and told him to wear it as a constant reminder of who he was - his father's son, no matter what. He'd never been scolded by his Da for his running away from home, although the rest of his family had done more than their fair share. He had thought Grandmama was going to almost kill him for the fourth time when she had nearly cracked his ribs with her hug. He had never known they had actually cared for him.

He wondered if that had changed. He had obviously changed, as he had found out from observing the men and women he traveled with. They had ... expectations. Expectations he very often did not meet for the sole reason that he was still not the Jack Sparrow they had come to know. And those expectations stretched out to the battle ground as well, so to speak. They expected something akin to miracles from him but what if he can't meet those expectations? He was only human. He didn't have his older self's experience. He didn't know their enemies like his older self probably did. So why do they trust him to lead them to victory when he was newer to the situation than they were?

*'Simple, mate. It's 'cause you're Captain Jack Sparrow!'* Said teen nearly started at the answer, eyes flicking about to see who had spoken. No one seemed to have spoken at all, almost as lost in thought as he was. Yet he had heard it, he was certain. The words had sounded slightly slurred but the tone, the *voice* ... it sounded somewhat familiar. Was it a suppressed memory slipping through Tia Dalma's spell? Or was it perhaps the Pearl's doing? A shimmy of the sails told him it was not the latter, although her giggle informed him it was indeed a memory and something said often enough that she found it amusing.

"That's why we need ye back, Jack." He focused in on his companions again, his eyes going straight to Gibbs, who had spoken. He seemed so earnest, so hopeful, so sincere that something in the teen steered and he realized he did not want to disappoint this loyal man. "The world went screwed 'bout the same time we lost ye so we need yer help to right it back up again."

"You, Barbossa and the rest of the Brethren Court will find a way to defeat Beckett, of that we have no doubt." Elizabeth added with determination, meeting and holding his gaze with pride, strength and confidence. Confidence in his ability to make it happen.

"No matter how impossible it may sound, we know we can count on you." Will said with a smile, raising his tankard in toast. Norrington surprised them all by being the first one to raise his cup in answer, a smirk on his face as he met all their eyes for a brief moment before they fell on Sparrow.

"The impossible is only the improbable. After all, you *are* Captain Jack Sparrow."

"A toast! To the best pirate we have all ever seen!" Theodor cheered and the others raised their drinks with cheers of their own. "To Captain Jack Sparrow!"

"To the sea!" Gibbs added.

"To th' Brethren Court." Barbossa threw in, standing up. The others followed suit, all except the stunned Jack, who just watched them as they regained their cheer from seemingly nowhere.

"To friends." Will toasted, sweeping his arm to indicate them all, although his eyes stayed glued firmly to Jack.

"Old and new," Jamaes agreed, offering a hand for their youngest member so he would join them in the standing circle. Jack hesitated for only a second but he allowed James to hoist him up, still not understanding how the somber atmosphere had dissolved like this.

"To adventure!" Marty exclaimed, thrusting his cup as high as his little body allowed.

"Wind in the sails!" Mr Cotton's parrot screeched as it had been jostled awake ever since Morveren's appearance. "Arrrrgh!" Said bird's owner agreed with a nod and a gesture with his own rum.

Elizabeth looked Jack straight in the eyes as she stepped closer, extending her tankard of rum so she and Jack could hit them in a toast. The fire lighting up their eyes had them both experiencing déjà vu, only Jack didn't know why while Elizabeth remembered days when this man had trusted her and hoped to see those days again. "To freedom." She said in an intimate tone, just barely heard over the cackling of the fire. Jack looked at her silently for a long moment before his tankard met hers and she smiled.

"To the Black Pearl."

Down below, in the cabin shared with Elizabeth, Tia Dalma smiled as she felt the first and biggest hurt starting to heal.

## Chapter 18

"Are you sure this is a good idea? This port isn't exactly pirate friendly, Jack." Two mornings later found James Norrington standing in Jack Sparrow's cabin as said Captain rummaged through his special chest of goods, searching for some box of only God and Sparrow knows what while the - by now most assuredly - ex Admiral stood uncertainly by the charts, looking at a specific point that represented the next port they will be docking in, which was already within sight and they will be arriving in in just a couple of hours. And, as he had said, it was not a pirate friendly port. Quite the contrary. The Governor of San Angelica had once upon a time made his port the center of a pirate hunting campaign led by the infamous El Matador Del Mar, if James' memory served well. Governor Martinez hated pirates almost as much as Beckett did, but Beckett's was both a personal and a business type of hatred while Governor Martinez hated piracy for what those who condone it do to innocent people. If James had to go back to pirate hunting one day, he would prefer it be under Governor Martinez's jurisdiction and not Beckett's. Still, it worried him that a pirate ship as famous as the Black Pearl was daring to approach the well guarded San Angelica, where they could easily be blown right out of the water by the Spanish guns from the fortress that overlooked the port. It was bigger and more infamous towards pirate kind than even Port Royal's Fort Charles was.

"And that's exactly why we won't be going in as pirates, *Captain*." Jack teased as he sauntered over and placed a fancy hat on James' head. Norrington looked up at it in bafflement and went to ask what Sparrow was bloody thinking when the young Pirate Lord thrust a pile of cloths in his arms and started pushing him out of the cabin. "Don't you worry your little Commadorial head, James! Just give the top two to Frederico and the one on the bottom is for you. He'll know what it's all about and he'll tell the others what to do. Now, no one is to disturb me until I come out or call for someone, savvy? Please pass it around. Ta-ta!" And the door slammed behind James as soon as he was fully out, locking and bolting before he could even turn around. He futilely tried the knob before he started pounding on the Captain's door.

"Sparrow! This is madness! We can't just sail into a Navy port! Sparrow? Sparrow! Open the door, blast you!"

"Is there a problem?" A grinning Will asked as he approached, his grin only turning innocent when Norrington's glare turned from the door to himself. "Just asking."

"Yes, there *is* a problem, Mr Turner. The problem of our addle brained Captain sailing us straight into the noose! And that's only if we're lucky to survive cannon fire, first!" James growled as he glared down at the fabric in his arms. What *was* this, anyway?

"San Angelica represents no danger to us, Señor Norrington." Sanchez said as he climbed onto the deck from bellow. "Not if you hand over that flag to me now."

"I beg your pardon?" The confused Englishman blinked almost owlishly at the Spaniard and the oldrr man only replied with a roll of his eyes and snatching up the things from James' arms. He arched an eyebrow at the ones on the bottom, giving Norrington a critical once over before giving them back and walking away.

"Nice hat," Will called after the scowling ex Commodore as he stalked after the retreating Spanish ex officer. Turner started choking on his own air and saliva when James showed him a rude hand gesture he'd learned during his stint in Tortuga over his shoulder, leaving the brunet blacksmith to gawk and the rest of the crew who had witnessed the exchange to either join him or let out guffs of laughter. James ignored them, instead focusing on Frederico ordering a couple of men to hoist the

dark red cloth that turned out to be, indeed, a flag or a banner of sort. As he watched it rising and bellowing in the wind, the English officer felt his eyes widening in startled recognition as he saw the image on the flag. If he didn't know any better, he would have sworn it was the emblem of one of the noble families of Spain, what with the golden crossed blades within a black circle decorated by more golden patterns that were far too detailed to be done by anyone but a master craftsman for a very, very high price. Behind the swords, almost invisible due to it being done with barely one or two threads, was a golden and red - red as the rest of the flag - flower, a rose if James' eyes were not deceiving him, almost swallowed by the black.

James turned gawking eyes to Frederico, who only shrugged. "I know no better than you, English, how Jack came to have this flag, although we've all seen him in a waistcoat that had this same emblem stitched on the inside of his back. He could have stolen them both, but why keep them all this time? Anyway, he uses it when he has to come here. The Governor is very ... taken with him." There was an evil smirk playing about Frederico's lips and James wondered why.

"And the ... clothes?" He asked after he inspected what was left of the cloth Jack had shoved onto him. Both what he had and what Frederico was holding looked like fancy clothing, although Frederico's looked like a black Spanish Navy uniform while James looked ... Well, similar but not nearly enough to it. It most certainly *was* a uniform, but a pilot's, a captain's at best. Frederico's looked more elaborate, ergo an officer's. "What is Sparrow planning?"

"An old rouse that has worked plenty of times before, Señor Norrington. Just dress in that and play along. I have a crew to educate." With that, the older man started shouting for the crew's attention, telling them what to do and how to act and all but throwing Theodor's and Philip's blue coats overboard when he saw them. James watched in interest as he started talking to the crew before shaking his head and disappearing below deck to do as he was told.

00000

Upon arriving in the San Angelica port, the Black Pearl was miraculously not fired upon even once, although there was a guard of soldiers waiting beside their docking spot as the black ship slid into place effortlessly. The crew uneasily placed down the boarding plank and watched as a middle aged man strode up without bothering with the curtsy of asking permission. He only bothered with it once he was on deck, asking for the captain. Norrington, at least, could play his part well easily enough, having been a military man almost his entire life. He exchanged pleasantries like a true gentleman with the man who turned out to be Governor Martinez before the older man grew bored of him and turned to Frederico.

"Ah! Señor Sanchez! Too long has it been, mi amigo! I should not be so surprised to see you sailing under this flag, after what happened to your Capitán. May he rest in peace." The man seemed both genuinely pleased and genuinely remorseful as he spoke, the clear familiarity between the two men all too obvious. "I am most glad to see you. How has been our *guapo señorita Jaquelin*? I do hope the loss has not been too crippling."

"I am always flattered when you fret over me so, dear Governor." The crew actually whipped around to stare and gawk at the woman who exited through the doors of the great cabin. Elizabeth stared at the beautiful woman dressed in that lovely dark red dress, that now that Norrington thought about it was the exact same shade as the flag flapping about their heads. The Black Pearl shimmied and James swore he hears giggles on the wind as he stared at the elegant, swaying walk of the young woman who now came to stand with James, Frederico and Martinez, who was smiling at her besottedly. She had tan skin and black hair pulled up in the most complicated hairdo James had ever seen, something between a bun, a French braid and dreadlocks-

Frederico had to stomp on the ex Commodore's foot when he almost called Jack by name, but thankfully Martinez didn't see, too focused on laughing black eyes, smiling red painted lips and the almost too open dress. The expense of skin that would have been showed was cleverly covered by the very same bandanna Sparrow usually wore around his head and all but one trinket had been mysteriously hidden in his hair. James could see them peeking through the braid like design but they looked more like tasteful, exotic hair pins or other such decorations than Sparrow's crazy collection of beads and trinkets that represented his memories. Jack had also somehow made it look like he had a modest chest and had covered up his work with that bandanna of his falling just right yet still revealing a little bit of teasing, deliciously tanned skin. The dress fit him more perfectly than it had Elizabeth and she was a *woman*. She did not find it insulting at all.

They had all been quite right when they had thought Jack looked incredible with the dress, that first day while he had been rummaging through his chest of wonders. But he looked even better *in* the dress. Maybe they should forbid him to let that beard grow and instead force him to shave regularly?

"Ah, señorita Jaquelin! *Bella como siempre*. It is a pleasure to see you again. Come, come! You must stay with us for a few days! It has been far too long!" Martinez kissed Jack's - washed and manicured - hands before all but tugging the 'lady' with him towards the plank. But Jack expertly slipped his hand free and came back to stand with Frederico and James, an apologetic smile on 'her' face as 'Jaquelin' delicately placed her hand in the crook of Norrington's elbow. Even startled as he was, the gentleman in James already had him positioning his arm right so it looked practiced and at ease.

"I'm afraid I must decline, señor. We are on a tight schedule and we *must* leave as soon as possible if we are to make the engagement we have set. However, we require some of your help, I fear. You see, my good sir, we were attacked! By pirates!" The crew had to give Jack credit. He made a wonderful damsel in distress, going so far as to lean against Norrington and shudder as though in fear. Martinez was practically fawning over her in a second, startling the Englishman with how suddenly he appeared at 'Jaquelin's' side. He looked up helplessly at Sanchez, but the scowling Spanish 'officer' sent him a deadly look and mouthed "Play along", before focusing back on the 'lady' with worry and righteous rage. "They were so terrible! But the crew was so brave and fought so fiercely for our humble ship. With the guidance of Captain Norry and Lieutenant Sanchez, we managed to get free. We made sail towards here as soon as we could!"

"Those vile pirates! I've been working on exterminating them from these waters for decades now. It was so much easier with Armando." James stiffened upon hearing that name, as did Jack, but for two wholly different reasons. The 'lady' made a choked sound and Martinez immediately became gentle again. "*Por favor*, señorita, forgive this insolent tongue for reminding you of your loss so."

"It is ... It's alright. Some wounds just never ... quite heal." 'Jaquelin' waved him off, drying 'he'r 'tears' before bravely squaring 'her' shoulders and facing the Governor. "If you could ... Provide us with some assistance, I'd much appreciate it, señor. We were lucky enough to receive only slight damage but our voyage could turn long and troublesome if not treated, I've been told. I'm sure our navigator, señor Hector, and our first mate, señor Gibbs, can tell you all about it."

"It would be my utmost pleasure to provide assistance to a dear friend." Martinez disappeared off of the plank, shouting orders at the dock workers in Spanish and seemingly hailing them all to the Black Pearl. James tugged Jack closer so he could hiss in his ear, startled to smell roses on the pirate's skin. When Jack had returned to him his coat, the night of the party after his unexpected soaking, courtesy of Morveren, the coat had strongly smelled of the sea, rum and spices and something else James could not quite place, something oriental, almost. Exotic. Some of that was still present under the rosebuds smell but it was subdued.

"How do you know this man? Why are you dressed like that? Whose flag is that really and how did you get it? And the dress?"

"Is now really the time, James?" It was hard to decide what was more distracting: the painted eyes or the painted lips. Neither were helping Norrington's case, either way. They had somehow made Sparrow even more ... mysterious. An enigma. Where did he learn to apply make-up and why? Who thought him to do that with his hair? Why had he first procured this dress? How was it that this Armando man was so intertwined with Sparrow's life? Where did the flag come from? Was it really stolen?

"Will you tell me later?" He asked, already suspecting the answer. Now, he had leverage. If Jack didn't tell him at least *something*, James could deliberately or accidentally blow their cower. That would mean open fire on the already damaged Pearl in an harbor that made them absolutely vulnerable no matter how you look at it. Later, Jack will be the one with the upper hand simply because Norrington had nothing to hold against him. This was quite possibly his only chance.

Jack paused, analyzing the situation in his head, James could just *see* it in his strangely expressive black eyes. Thoughts flashed through his head at a dizzying speed, ideas considered and cast away so rapidly that James began wondering if Jack was getting dizzy in his own head. And then he nodded and started talking, surprising James further with the fact that he had won this round.

"While I sailed on Armando's ship, I was dressed like a pirate - which I was, mind you - and the crew worried about my reception in the town. So I stole the closest clothing I could find in the docks and snook back onto the ship, but Martinez was already there. Hidden in Armando's cabin, I pulled up the dress as best as I could and hid my clothes, although not my waist coat. When Martinez invited himself in to Armando's cabin, I kind of just shrieked and threw a pillow at him, acting like an offended maiden. Since he already thought some woman was aboard, I had no choice but to continue the rouse. I dressed myself as best as I could and came out, introducing myself simply as Jaquelin but, having seen the stitching on my waist coat when he had entered the cabin, Martinez got it in his head that I'm some duke's daughter or something and treated me as such. Thank god my family has had some strange experiences in the past and had taught me *something* about life at court - don't ask, too long a story - and I just held myself like Fitzwilliam used to and I fooled him quite well. He still thinks I'm a spirited, free, open-minded, opinionated woman who loves adventure and sailing that Armando had picked up somewhere during his voyages, either a shipwreck survivor or a rebellious daughter running away from home. I ended up needing to make a banner for myself since he had invited me and Armando for a ball he was holding, which is where he apparently ended up smitten with me. Too bad he caught us making out in the gardens; for him, anyway. He was probably the only one in the entire Caribbean stationed Spanish Navy to think Armando was getting married and denoted and denied all rumors of Armando falling in love with a boy pirate who tricked him and ran away. Last time I remember coming here was maybe a month and a half before Armando's ... death," a shuddering breath accompanied the word. "He was surprised to see us apart and I told him he was out on some dangerous quest and did not want me to get hurt. Thankfully, Captain Morgan had no problem with keeping up the rouse and waving that flag about. Still have no idea about the flag and the symbolics, but there is some for my family. Not sure if I ever found out. Is that all, Commodore Norrington?"

James balked at the formal address but he guessed he deserved it. Sparrow protected his stories like a whale protected its young from hungry sharks. And these ones with Armando seemed to be the most distressing.

"I apologize for leaving so abruptly, how rude of me." Martinez said as he reappeared. "This one is indeed a fine vessel, señorita. The dock workers say they will not need more than but a few hours

to fix it. You will be able to set sail with the evening tide."

"Wonderful!" Jack even clapped his hands together like an excited child. "You are such a swell man, Governor Martinez. Tell me, has no fair maiden stolen your heart yet? For I am at least sure they have all freely given you their's."

"Perhaps," the man replied a bit sadly. James could see in him a man who had given up, accepting as graciously as he could that the one he wanted loved another. Norrington felt pity for him. A year ago, he had been much in the same place, but as time passed by and he didn't see Elizabeth again or even hear of her, while the worry persisted, he realized it was not the kind of wordy he had seen in young William Turner. While yes, he *had* loved Elizabeth and perhaps still held a special corner of his heart for her, the rest of his heart had let her go, accepted her decision in full and had moved on. Accepting defeat and settling for what he could get - not the woman he loved but the commission he had restored and improved on, his duty, his honor and his dignity - he had actually in time almost completely gotten over his feelings for her. Besides, had it ever been truly love if he could so easily let her go, without so much as even a fight, a struggle? He just cared for her as a friend these days, finding his eyes straying ... elsewhere.

"Wonderful! You *must* pursue her. Find your happiness. You are young still, I am sure she will be flattered." Sparrow seemed oblivious to the man's pain but the Governor seemed elated just to see 'her'. James wondered if he'd still want 'Jaquelin' if he learned *she* was a *he*. Had he fallen for her 'charms' or for 'her' personality and spirit?

"I do believe it is too late for me now, but let us not discuss such topics. Tell me, Jaquelin, what have you been up to these years? We must catch up! Come, I will treat you to a luncheon." He offered 'her' his elbow and Jack took it, letting him steer them towards the plank absentmindedly as he made up stories of wondrous but safe and not at all mystical adventures. In turn, 'she' asked him about the increased numbers of EITC ship's they'd spotted on their 'voyage'. How clever, and a bit cruel, to use his emotions for 'her' to get information they might need.

"Señor, señorita, if I may be so bold to cut in before you go enjoy your meal," Frederico finally spoke up again, stopping the pair in their tracks. Jack was sending looks and secret gestures Gibbs' way and he seemed to understand them, scurrying off with Ahmed, Lee and Ragetti and Pintel bellow deck. "But I do believe there are matters you must address first, Governor. For we have managed to capture the captain of the pirate scum."

James saw Sparrow flinch and Martinez furrow his brow in anger. As if on cue, a half delirious Captain Hugo Lopez was brought before them, blinking up at Sparrow in confusion, recognizing his face but not understanding the difference. However, he sobered a great deal when he saw Martinez and his thunderous expression glaring down at him with murder in his eyes.

"*Lopez*," the Governor hissed and Hugo flinched before directing a glare at the 'lady' as Martinez made a speech about justice being served and every criminal and betrayer getting what they deserved. Jack didn't look away, not even when Hugo threw him a spiteful look as his crimes were then numbered, as though already at the gallows.

"You're a cruel one, brat." He spat as he was finally dragged away. "Cruel, cruel, cruel. Like the mermaids!" He kept cackling and yelling as the marines took him away, chilling the civilian standbiers to the bone.

Jack just looked after him with Norrington and Sanchez flanking him as Martinez excused himself and went after the traitor.

"Cruel is a matter of perspective."





## Chapter 19

"You seem most forlorn to be leaving such a dangerous place for your kind, Jack." Sparrow didn't even look up from where he was once again staring at his Compass in the crow's nest and Norrington heaved a sigh as he nudged the teen a little so he would have space as well. It felt an awful lot like the first night of this crazy voyage, when no one knew nothing about this version of Jack Sparrow and he knew nothing about them. Sparrow had opened up to him that night with something unexpected, opening up new possibilities for a better understanding and a greater relationship between them other than just worthy opponents. When the younger man didn't reply, James sighed again and leaned over to see the Compass and the direction it was pointing. He frowned, did a little recalculation of their course and figured out, to his surprise, that it was *still* pointing in the same direction as it had all these days, it seems. He looked up at the moody teen's face and dared ask. "Is there something weighting on your mind, Jack?"

There was a long moment of silence, so long Norrington began thinking his question will receive no answer when Jack finally replied, eyes still glued on to the Compass.

"Am I a bad person?" That surprised him but he didn't say anything, thinking Jack would follow up an explanation for such an inquiry, but he didn't so James warily ventured further into the topic.

"What makes you ask something like that?"

"Oh, the simple fact that Lopez is right and I am indeed a cruel person." Sparrow replied almost offhandedly, still staring at his Compass as though it had all the answers in the world. Well, in a way, maybe it did. And if not the answers themselves, it sure as hell had the means to find them. But what the young Pirate Lord was making no sense at all to the ex Navy man.

"And what makes you think *that*?"

Jack chuckled bitterly, finally closing the Compass and looking at Norrington. "Don't you see? I seem to be stringing everyone along, wherever I go, no matter what I do or how I do it. Lucia, Armando, Martinez ... those are just the ones *I* remember. How many more had *he* strung along? How many more lives had *he* ruined? Because I highly doubt this is the end of the list. Not with how easily I wrapped Finch around my finger. Not with where Will's father is now. Not with where *you* are now."

James stiffened, straightening his back and frowning at Sparrow irritably. "You have not in any way influenced my being here, *Captain*. I've chosen to come on my own."

"Have you? You know, Will told me everything. I know who you are, what you did, how you ended up on the ship that sailed for World's End. You may have come to assist on your own but you most definitely had not went on the big journey by your free will. They practically press-ganged you. That goes against the Code." A bitter smile was tugging Jack's lips in an expression that didn't sooth Sparrow at all. "I ruined your life, James Norrington. There's nothing that can argue that."

"If you have indeed been informed of everything, than you know I have come here, not by your doing, but by my own." Said man said sternly, not understanding what the teen was aiming at. "You had nothing to do with me ending up here any more than Barbossa did."

"Actually, if I recall Will's recall of the last few years well - and I do; trust me, I have an amazing memory - you kind of followed me into a hurricane with a big ship going by the name of Dauntless.

Quite a fitting name, if you actually went and did it." The younger said with no small amount of admiration and respect. James felt a swell of pride in his chest at that. Sparrow didn't give out compliments easily, at least not genuine ones meant simply as a compliment and not as flattery. Jack shook his head and continued, his voice going back to that bitter tone. "You followed me in with a ship that had no chance of withstanding the storm or escaping it. You're the second person that did that and you were only lucky to have survived. Armando hadn't been so lucky."

The Englishman's eyes widened in shock. "He ... He followed you into a hurricane?" At least he wasn't the only one insane and obsessed enough to do that, although this Armando fellow had been desperately in love with Sparrow. What excuse did he have? Pride? Arrogance? Ignorance, maybe? He'd rather say foolishness, as it was closest to the truth. Stupidity. And a stubborn willfulness to forget any reason he had, any sanity as he tried to forget the public rejection Elizabeth had dealt him, focused solely on the task at hand: catching Sparrow and ridding the Caribbean of the last real pirate threat. But, in the end, he had only ended up losing his ship and almost all of his men. The rare few who had survived, not counting Groves and Gillete, hated him and would never serve under him again. Was it a comfort to know he was not the first?

Jack winced before he scooted away from James as best as he could in the tight space of the crow's nest, opening the Compass again when he was far enough. His eyes were once again glued to the blasted thing and he wouldn't look at James. "Not a ... hurricane, per se. Somewhere ... much, much worse." Haunted black eyes looked up in the direction the Compass had been pointing since the start. "I wonder how *he* had felt when *another* one followed him to their doom? Did *he*- Did *I* forget Armando and was completely indifferent? Was I actually born as one of the merfolk to be luring men to their doom so often?"

Norrington scowled at Sparrow, although he was a bit unnerved by how he was referring to himself as two different people. He guessed they might as well have been, had they ever been placed in the same room at the same time. Some of their differences were so startling that it was strange to even think this boy to be Captain Jack Sparrow. And worst still, only Gibbs and Tia Dalma - and partially Babrossa, as he had revealed when Morveren had visited - knew what had made him this way, what had changed this young man so completely that his true self was hiding under an impeccable mask of his own making.

What would their reactions be, if these two versions of Jack Sparrow were to meet? Would the teen one feel proud of whom he had become or would he regret it? Be ashamed of his older self? And what would the older one tell his past self? What advice would he give, which information would he divulge?

He shook his head. Now wasn't the time to be thinking about that. Sparrow had somehow gotten it into his head that he was a cursed creature or a curse in of itself, simple as that and that just wouldn't do. Not when Tia Dalma had only a couple of days ago said that Jack had started healing. It would be a right sorry thing for all that healing to be so easily undone by the delirious words of a cruel, traitorous pirate. Norrington idly wondered why it was always him that was stuck with taking care of Sparrow when he was in a melancholy, moping mood before shaking it off and moving closer to Sparrow in a swift lunge, so as to be able to pin the slippery pirate in place. That, at times, seemed to be the only way to make him listen.

Jack yelped when they found themselves nose to nose, their breaths intermingling as James caged him with his arms on either side of the younger man. A blush spread like wildfire over Sparrow's face, down his neck and into his shirt-line, black eyes wide as they met serious, determined green ones that were only centimeters away.

"Listen here, Sparrow, because I don't like repeating myself. It. Is. Not. Your. Fault. Either for me

or for this ... Armando person. We both were presented with the choice of whether we'll continue chasing you or if we'll call it all off. You were only running for your life and protecting your ship and crew, like any admirable, respectable Captain would do. We can only blame ourselves for our foolishness and our mistakes. The Dauntless could never keep up with the storm and if I remember correctly what you told me about Armando's death, he had followed you in a place where he cannot properly maneuver his ship. Our lapse of judgment was *not* your fault. You need to accept that and move on, or else you will never be happy or free. I thought you were all about freedom." He challenged, holding the pirate in place, straining to see him properly in the meager moonlight.

Jack's eyes were still wide as he answered, desperate for James to understand, to get away and stay away before he, too, followed in Armando's footsteps. He had been lucky, the last time. Sparrow didn't want to be the cause of James demise, as he rather ... liked the man. He didn't want him to get hurt, or worse.

"James ... Jamie! Listen to me, luv! I *taunted* Armando, like a bull! I did it on purpose, knowing he would chase me! I wasn't some innocent standing by, watching it all happen! I orchestrated it! I ... I led him to his death, knowing full well what I was doing and I didn't even hesitate. How can I be anything but a bad, horrible person?"

When Sparrow looked away, Norrington brought up one hand to push his face upwards so they were facing each other once again. "Just like you issued the challenge knowing what would happen, he had accepted it just as readily. It was his choice to make, Jack. He knew what might happen and he did what he thought was best. Don't disrespect him like this by degrading the scale of your battle or making him seem like a fool who blindly followed."

"But he didn't know what he was getting himself into!" The other protested still, eyes going suspiciously sparkly. "He never believed me when I told him sea legends and stories. He didn't know what to expect. He didn't believe it and I knew that, used it to my advantage." Jack had all but curled up in on himself, which brought his forehead to James' chest.

Norrington almost didn't register the whimper he made as his own brain raced to process this new information. Sparrow had used something supernatural against Armando? Not surprising, all things considered, since the supernatural seemed to be Sparrow's third shadow, the second being trouble and all that.

"That's called tactics, Jack. Nothing crueler than any tactics you might use against any other enemy." He pointed out, hands absently moving to comfort the lad. His arms were soon around the sobbing pirate and he sighed, wondering when this had become his life and why he didn't mind in the slightest. It felt nice, holding the teen against him. The shuddering of the Black Pearl as she tried to comfort her Captain - and yes, James had come to terms with the fact that the ship was semi-sentient - were pleasant and it would all be all the better if only Jack would stop being so upset. "Where did my confident, flamboyant Captain disappear off to? Did something happen at lunch with Martinez?"

Sparrow's twitch told him more than he needed to know. He waited patiently, knowing Jack will speak when he feels comfortable. Seemingly infinite minutes later, the boy spoke, voice hushed, words muffled against James chest, somehow making it all the more intimate. Never mind that this was who knows which time that Jack shared something personal with James and James alone.

"Martinez ... Talked about Armando. And the rumors about his heart being stolen by the 'filthy, sneaky, cur son of a bitch's bastard' pirate Jack Sparrow. He tried to reassure 'Jaquelin' that the rumors were not true, that it was very obvious how much Armando loved 'her'. And it *hurt*. Stabbed at my heart. Because I always, *always* just *knew* it was true." He closed his eyes so he

wouldn't have to look at James', hands tight around the Compass. "Even the Compass confirmed it. And I took advantage of that."

Norrington blinked, trying hard to focus on everything he had said and not just that last part but his mind rebelled. "You had the Compass with you?"

"Aye. Captain Morgan might have been the official 'owner', but it was I who bargained for it in his name. Tia wouldn't give it up to just anyone, you know." A small smile, the first not bitter but still sad of the evening, stretched across young, tanned lips. "She actually *refused* to give it up. Never even considered giving it away until I came with Captain Morgan. He tried bargaining with her for hours until he finally gave up but then Tia Dalma just walked over to me, minding my own business while reading through some of her books - voodoo magic is *fascinating* when you don't go snooping around for immortality, brainwashing or resurrection - and just took my hand and put the Compass in it. It pointed to the sea, to the Wench, of course, and she just smiled this mysterious smile before telling us that we can take it only *if* Captain Morgan swears on his life that the Compass will be passed on to me. And so we took it. And he passed it on to me when he died. We kept our word. I had it ever since. I guess I never betrayed it, if it's still in my possession."

"Betrayed it?" James almost wanted to scoff. It was a Compass. It can't be betrayed, no matter how magical it might be ... Right?

"You see, James, this Compass is, as you no doubt know if you've ever really met me, magical. It points you towards what you want most in the world. And as long as you stay loyal to it, it will never lead you wrong. As long as you know what you want." Jack told him, seemingly going back to his old self, cheering up as he talked about his magical navigation device. It was clear it was precious to him almost as much as the Pearl, who was purring in pleasure at her Captain's lifting mood. "But if you ever betray it or the pirate way of life, throw it away, give it to someone else or leave it behind with no intention of getting it back, it will unleash your greatest fear and practically lead it straight to you. I guess I took good care of it if it's still working for me."

"It wasn't a year or so ago." Norrington said thoughtfully, staring at the dark little box. "You needed Elizabeth to guide you to the Dead Man's Chest on Isla Cruces."

"That might be true, but have you noticed how I stressed the 'as long as you know what you want' part?" Jack leaned in a bit more to the ex Navy officer as he was wont to when explaining things or talking about something exciting or just plain trying to make a point. It made their noses bump and James swallowed, mouth and throat suddenly helplessly dry. "That's because the Compass is merely a tool to help us not get lost. In order for it to work properly, you need to have the direction already in your heart and *that* is infinitely more rare than the Compass' tracking magic. Or at least that's what Armando said." This time, James' breath was knocked right out of his lungs at the tender smile Jack sported just then. The teen was both beautiful and handsome, although the first was still a bit more obvious at this age, but he was doubly so when such a tender, fond, gentle smile touched his lips. "He said that a person who has that ability, to know their heart and what they want, is far more precious than the item itself. He said it was for the best if it stayed with me, someone who obviously knew their heart's desires, as it was safest with me."

"How did you learn the Compass knew he loved you?" The breathless ex Commodore asked, not moving his eyes away from the smile and how it made Sparrow look even younger and somehow ... innocent. James knew that he was far from it, even at this age. Jack had practically *confessed* his sins to him! But he seemed so ... childlike in this moment. And Norrington felt something cold pierce his heart as he realized Jack was once again wearing a mask with them, one not even Tia Dalma seems to have realized was there. For Jack was not acting his own age, instead trying to be infinitely more mature, a reliable Captain. He wondered just *when* whatever was left of the Pirate

Lord's childhood had been drowned in the deep blue sea.

"One night, he picked it up and opened it, smiled sadly and closed it, put it back where he found it and left, thinking I had been asleep and hadn't seen him do it. I went over to it, opened it with some things lying around so I wouldn't touch it and change what it was pointing to and found it pointing in my direction. Now, I didn't immediately figure it out, that it was *me* it was pointing to, but I did eventually, when I started pacing while I thought what it was that he could have possibly smiled so sadly at and I noticed the needle was moving with me. I checked it a few more times before it became indisputable and ... Well, I was happy. I would have gladly stayed with him forever if only he had not turned out to be a pirate hunter." Jack looked wistful, a hand coming up to play with the brocade of James' slowly tattering Navy coat. Norrington did his best not to react. Jack's hand was almost right over his heart and it would not do for the pirate to realize how hard it was pumping. "My family are all pirates, you know. I couldn't go against that. I couldn't let Armando kill my Da. I couldn't betray Captain Morgan and the crew. I couldn't betray my Wicked Wench - they would have sunk her, no doubt about it. And I couldn't betray the Compass."

"What was it even doing with you if your captain was the official owner?"

"'Official'," Jack said with the appropriate air quotes before letting both hands play with the braids of James' coat, intertwining and untangling them with animated, restless fingers. "He was only allowed to have it if *I* will eventually get it. And since I usually knew what I wanted and acted as pilot half the time, Captain Morgan - he was a mentor, of sorts, to me, ever since I left Shipwreck Cove on the Wench - usually left it with me. So when I ended up with the Spanish, I still had it with me. But I had to send it away. I had to get back to the Wench, so I used Lucia's tear to call her and she came. I asked her to follow the Compass to a ship called the Wicked Wench and to give it to Captain Morgan. She did and Captain Morgan found me."

"Only for you to learn that Armando planned on sinking your ship and you ended up running away." James finished, remembering the story Jack had told him. "So you left behind your lover, who later on chased you all over until his passing."

"Aye, and that's not the end of it. I became a Pirate Lord a week after his death." Jack snorted, putting away his Compass. "Seems like such a hollow victory, mate."

"Not at all. It kind of honors him, don't you think?" When Jack blinked at him in confusion, Norrington chuckled. "Think about it. His ... demise was considered so great a success among pirates that you were declared a Pirate Lord. I would see that as the highest form of respect. The undoing of one man is the making of a Pirate Lord? Definitely an honor. It's acknowledgment."

"I never thought about it like that." Jack admitted and smiled thankfully up at him. He surprised the green eyes man when he leaned up and pressed a chaste kiss on the stunned ex Commodore's cheek. "Thank you, James."

"N-no problem," said male stuttered out around his blush, which only increased when Sparrow tugged him down so they were sitting next to each other and cuddled up against the taler, almost curling up around him.

It was not fair how quickly he fell asleep while Norrington was left alone to his thoughts, wondering why his cheek still tingled.

## Chapter 20

"It's okay, you know." Jack Sparrow nearly jumped out of his skin at the unexpected greeting, accidentally jerking the helm a little, momentarily taking them off course until he corrected it. His Pearl complained at him for such manhandling of her helm and he sent a mental apology to her before turning around to look at the approaching Spaniard. Federico had kept the Spanish Navy uniform Jack had been hiding in his chest for some twenty odd years and the sight of him in his Navy attire nearly sent Jack back in time, when he had only jokingly steered a much bigger ship, usually more content to joke around with the crew or spend ... quality time with said ship's captain. He shook the memories away and instead focused on the present as the older man came to stand beside him, the both of them looking out to the horizon, where dawn was inching the sun over the water.

"What's okay?" The teen asked when the man didn't say anything else, just stared out at the rising sun. He was rather curious as to what would have Sanchez up so early when he had had a late shift last night. By all rights, he should still be sleeping. Jack, on the other hand, had woken up an hour ago, wrapped up in James Norrington's arms up in the crow's nest for ... what, second, third time now? He rather liked the feeling of it, if he was being honest, those strong arms around him. But he could not bare to linger in the hold once he awoke, for it reminded him of a different time and made his heart ache. Still, this time, he had found himself ... reluctant to leave. Maybe he had shimmied out of Norrington's arms but he had not wanted to leave him up in the crow's nest until the Black Pearl asked him to take the helm from one of the crew before he passed out and put them *way* off course. So he had climbed down with one last look at the sleeping man, relieved the other pirate and found himself at the helm, chatting quietly with his lady love as they sailed towards the sunrise.

Frederico still didn't look at his new Captain as he answered. "Falling in love again." He said, ignoring the almost pained, shocked gasp the teen produced as he continued. "Falling in love with señor Norrington. He seems like a good chap."

"I'm not-"

"There is no point lying, *señor Gorrion*. I've known you long enough to see." Sanchez smiled at him a bit sadly, apologetically. "I can see that look in your eyes, the same one you had before Capitán Salazar finally told you of his *amor* for you. You're hoping yet not daring to be hopeful. And you are holding back."

"I know it's been twenty years for everyone else but it's only been a *month* for *me*!" Sparrow snapped, glaring at the Spaniard. He felt like he was backed into a corner. He wasn't ready to face this, not yet, not while his heart still ached for Armando and all they could have had and been, not while guilt still ate away at him. Yes, he will admit that he liked James, he really, really did and Federico was probably right, but Jack was not ready to move on. Not yet. Not until he checks the Devil's Triangle.

"I know. And the Capitán would have been so proud of you for being so strong and taking it all so well." The older one replied gently, placing a comforting hand on Sparrow's shoulder. "But he would *not* want his little Sparrow to never be happy again. He would want you to move on, live your life, enjoy yourself and maybe just remember him fondly on occasion. He would be sad to see *you* so sad."

"I know," came the moaned answer, as though in misery. "But I still feel like it would be betraying him. I can still see his face so clearly. What would he think of me if he could see me now?"

Frederico squeezed his shoulder comfortingly before patting it, his hand moving to the messy head and petting him like one would a child. Now, more than ever, Jack *was* a child to Frederico. Their age difference had increased a good number of years. Two whole decades. It was, to this day, a shock to the Spaniard's mind to look at the boy he had known twenty or so years ago and not see him grown up into a man. "He would be proud. He had always seen you for your true potential and what you might become. He might not be too thrilled about you turning fully pirate but would never hold it against you. He never did, Jack Sparrow." The teen looked up sharply at hearing his name fall from a Silent Mary's crew member's lips, eyes widening in shock. It had never happened before. To them all, he had been birdie or señor Gorrión or *little Sparrow*, as the captain called him. Frederico Sanchez smiled, letting his hand rest heavily on the boy's head. "Capitán loved you so fully that he had forgiven you for being a pirate. But he wanted you back at his side, where he can keep you safe from other pirate hunters, like he had with 'Jaquelin', so we searched for you and continued doing our job. None of the crew ever begrudged you for leaving although we *were* a bit angry with you in the beginning. You had stolen our beloved Capitán's heart and had made off with it. He searched for you not to demand it back, but to see if you might still be keeping it. He wanted you safe above everything else, safe and happy. I do not know what happened in those last weeks of the Mary's journey, but I *do* know he would not have met a more satisfactory end than to fall at your hand, especially if it meant your safety and continued happiness. You wanted freedom," he pulled his hand away, turning away from the silently crying lad, plucking out a clean handkerchief to offer it to him. "He knew he was tempted to cage you. So he let you make your own path and set yourself free. If he could let you fly away, his precious little Sparrow whom he loved more than he hated the thing he despised most in the world, then surely you can return his love by letting him sail away, birdie." He looked down at the Captain again. "Just this one last time, so he may search for his peace."

"But that's why I *can't* let him go." Argued Sparrow. "Not just because I love him or because I'm a selfish pirate who wants to hold on to old ghosts. I can't let him go," he took a shuddering breathe, pulling out his Compass and opening it, letting Frederico see the direction the needle was pointing in. The one direction it had been pointing in since Jack had first opened it ever since he had woken up as a de-aged Pirate Lord in his own future. "Because I fear he cannot find his peace."

Sanchez looked mournfully in the direction the Compass was pointing before looking away and heading towards the stairs that led to the main deck, his destination his own hammock. Still, he stopped at the top of the stairs to look at his old friend seriously in the eye, imparting one last piece of advice to him.

"Then find your own so you may one day share it with him, señor Gorrión. Find your own so you can *live* and his greatest wish can be more than wistful thinking." He left Jack then, to ponder his words as the horizon lit up with the most beautiful colors of dawn, heading down for more rest.

00000

Three more days worth of sailing finally brought them almost to their destination and there were many mixed reactions when land was finally spotted. They still had an entire day and night worth of sailing in order to get there, but Shipwreck Island was finally, *finally* in sight. And for the very first time since he had woken up twenty years since his last memory, Jack found himself relaxing fully as a grin split his face. He was home. He didn't know how many years have passed, what sorts of adventures he'd been through, what places he's seen and what sort of people he'd met, but he was just glad to be home, no matter what. Shipwreck Island was safety. From any external threats or from any threat that might come after him personally. They were now within the Keeper's immediate jurisdiction and only a fool would dare attack a Pirate Lord here.

Here more than in all the seven oceans combined the Code was the law.

Feeling rather happy and in a good, lighthearted mood, Jack let Mr Cotton take over the helm as he cheerily made his way over to where James had sat down to repair some sails despite it not being his shift yet. He was restless and needed to keep his mind busy so he won't think about his recent closeness to Jack. Ever since he held the pirate as he fell asleep that first night on the Pearl, when Jack had revealed how vulnerable this whole situation was making him feel, James had found himself strangely protective of the teen. However, recently, he had found out that that wasn't the case just because his need to protect the innocent had been struck by Jack's sudden youth. He had been trying to come to terms with something that had already registered a long time in his heart and even his mind but had been suppressed. Jack Sparrow was a *very* fine looking man, no matter his age.

James had learned in his years of service, and even more in Tortuga, that sometimes, in order to find release, men turned to different sources of comfort and pleasure. On a ship, even a Navy one where buggery would be punished by hanging the culprits from the yardarm, men found comfort in other men, committing so called sins against god. Please do note that, after dozens of supernatural experiences and situations he'd been through, James had found it hard to believe in the simple black and white context of morality that comes from the Holy Bible and some hypocritical priest's mouth. So he had started thinking a bit more openmindedly and had actually indulged himself in Tortuga, quite often in fact, until he found himself almost penniless. He had reserved the rest of his money for drinks instead of lads or lasses of the night. And he had found he rather liked the lads a great deal more than the lasses, no matter how pretty or talented.

Hatred and anger had stopped him from seeing it back then with his newly opened eyes - and *yes*, he *was* aware of the irony, thank you very much and go screw yourself - but he could see and picture it now without a problem. Jack Sparrow was a very beautiful individual. As a grown man, the scale tipped in favor of handsomeness, but right now, he was more pretty than handsome. Still, Sparrow was definitely easy on the eyes and James had found their recent closeness had some ... rather interesting aftereffects. He was almost embarrassed by how often he had to take care of it in the sleeping quarters and he at times felt a little guilt of the dreams and fantasies that result from it all. But only a little, for it had made him realize something very important.

He wanted Jack Sparrow.

Now, with that realization came a few problems, and no, he didn't mean just the steady increase of those lewd, pleasurable dreams. With it came the rejection that had never been said, for James knew even before he said anything to Sparrow what the response would be. Maybe with the older one, they could have worked something out, but not this Sparrow. This Sparrow had only recently lost his lover and was still mourning him almost every night. He still dreamed of this Armando man and James felt he will never get a chance with Jack. Besides, he didn't want to be a replacement. That wouldn't be fair to him, Jack or the dead man.

That didn't stop him wanting, though, and it had become particularly hard to deny himself, especially this last two days.

Ever since Jack had had that little talk with Frederico, he had thought long and hard on the matter and decided the man was right. Jack needed to move on. Yes, he will still probably think about Armando for a while longer, but Frederico was wrong if he thought Jack didn't know how to live without the man. And yes, Jack still loved him but he had learned to let his heart grow so that Armando now only held up a small part of it instead of the whole he had once had. The evidence of just how successful he had been at that was that he had, indeed, found himself fancying James. So Jack had started putting on all of his charms, trying to get it across to the older man, finding it fun when he won small victories. Really small, but there, so Jack wasn't disheartened when James refused to look at him as he sat down beside the man and started sewing with him. Surely if he had



seduced and charmed the great Capitán Armando Salazar of the Silent Mary, El Matador Del Mar, bane of pirates everywhere, then it shouldn't be much harder to do the same for Admiral (and former Commodore and twice turned pirate by now) James L. Norrington of his Highness Royal Navy, scourge of the pirates of the Caribbean, wouldn't be that much harder. True, Jack had unknowingly won Salazar's heart but he planned on winning Norrington's as well and he will make sure James does *not* end up like Armando had.

*'Maybe I have a Navy fetish, seeing as who my former lover was and who I want now?'* Jack mused himself as he expertly mended one of the spare sails without much thought. *'Or is it the chase I like? They were both pirate hunters, some of the best.'* He chuckled quietly to himself as he allowed his and James' knees to touch, the sail comfortable between his own, assuring him faster and easier maneuvering with the needle. James very nearly stabbed himself through the hand with the needle at the touch. Sparrow wanted to chuckle at the reaction but held back, playing innocent as he felt those green eyes looking at him.

"What was your life like, James, before we met? I don't think I ever got the opportunity to ask you before."

Norrington stopped in his work for a while, just staring at Jack's nimble fingers at work before shaking his head and answering, eyes once again focused on the sail. "Not nearly as adventurous as yours had been, I assure you. You already know who my father and cousin and uncle were, so you can pretty much guess what life was like for me: high class parties, boring, stuck up people, stuffy wigs and clothing, lots of Navy and education. I knew my mother very briefly before she passed away and I am an only child. Not much to tell, I'm afraid."

"How did you end up out on the sea, then?" Jack was insistent. "The sea calls to all men, aye, but rare few hear the call and come willingly. Only those restless on land feel at ease on the waves, luv. Me, for one, I was born on sea and had my sea legs before land legs, as sailors often jokingly call them. The sea called to me since I was young and my Da never denied me. Then I ran away, twice, before finally sailing away on the Wicked Wench with his blessing, if you can call it that. It was more like threatening Captain Morgan to make sure I don't get killed, really. But that's me. I'm different. What about *you*, Jamie?"

"Why do you call me that infernal butchery of my Christian name?"

"Because we're friends. I hope?" He sounded hopeful even to his own ears and James finally stopped looking at his work, set it aside and focused on the teen. The teen that had been growing bolder and bolder with his subtle flirting in the past couple of days and had been driving the ex Commodore mad.

"Perhaps," the older replied, leaning in closer and startling Jack with a peck to his lips. He pulled away with a smirk on his lips, teasing Jack without words. Just with that expression alone. "Perhaps we could be a bit ... more?" He knew he shouldn't be doing this. He knew Jack still held a candle for that Armando guy. But he couldn't help himself. Like in Tortuga with the rum, he was hooked and he *wanted* to be hooked. If Jack was only searching for release, it would still be something. James just wanted him for himself for a while and he seemed to be selfish enough to not care that this might blow up into his face sooner or later. All he cared about at the moment was how those black eyes had found focus on only his lips and he in turned wanted to claim James'. *'Pirate,'* he thought at himself as he leaned in kissed those soft, eager lips with his own once again. It was still chaste and they pulled back after only a few seconds, black on green, hands slowly reaching out towards each other, holding wrists and shoulders and shirts. Both were a bit flushed but they didn't care.

Jack smiled gently, leaning in against James again, chasing his lips. "Perhaps." He said before their lips mashed in a passionate kiss.

00000

Martinez was glaring at the two men, a sneer on his face as he handed over a leather envelope containing the damned papers that had put him in such a foul mood back to their owner. Hugo Lopez smiled appreciatively, only because he knew it would infuriate the Governor of San Angelica even more, before nodding a half genuine thanks to the man who had saved him from a noose.

"Now, Mr Lopez, why don't you tell me just *how* you ended up in such a situation. The Letter of Marque should have saved me the trouble of personally coming here to save your neck instead of hunting for the Pirate Lords as I was." Lord Cutler Beckett said as he lounged in one of the Governor's chairs in said man's office. Mr Mercer, his secretary slash assassin, stood to his right with the fearsome form of Davy Jones to his left and a few paces behind, like a faithful dog. He sure as hell was growling like one as being forced to come to Martinez's fine ship just so he could intimidate the man if Lord Beckett's documents proved inefficient in freeing Lopez. The grandeur of his office connected to the great cabin rivaled any office Beckett had on land and it miffed the man that not even his standing as a Lord bothered the man all that much. The captain of the Flying Dutchman had not even received the bating of an eyelash when he had appeared out of the wall at Beckett's call. The Lord knew he won't be getting anything out of this one.

"Well, my Lord, I was just sailing about, minding my own business, when I saw this *dine* ship on the horizon and I decided a little plunder and a few caught pirates would be for our mutual good." Lopez started silkily, a mock innocent smile on his face which turned into a vicious grin at the Lord's arched eyebrow and the Governor's strained growl. "Imagine my surprise when I realized why it was such a fine ship was because it was black, from topmast to hull, except for the pretty golden figurehead." He seemed to enjoy the stiffening of Beckett and Jones while Martinez just arched an eyebrow at him. "Of course, knowing that the only ship of that rightful description has been rotting at the bottom of the sea bed for the past year, I had my doubts. But then I saw her Captain and it is indeed very, *very* hard to mistake Captain Jack Sparrow for anyone else but who he is."

"That's *enough*!" Jones thundered, snatching up the man by his neck with his crab hand, nearly killing him instantly with the force put behind it. Martinez didn't seem disturbed or frightened as he watched Jones manhandle Lopez, but he didn't hold any love lost for the traitor and even less pity. "I won't listen t' yer lies no more! Jack Sparrow be rottin' in ma Locker along with th' Black Pearl. And I will make sure ya see fer yerself!"

"Jones, that's enough." Beckett told him calmly, glaring at the brute. "Let him go and remember your place." The Captain of the Flying Dutchman did so reluctantly, stepping away from the gasping man and glowering at the diminutive Lord, whose cold eyes were focused on Hugo. "Now, Mr Lopez, do tell this ... story of yours. For I am not sure I am in the mood for any tomfoolery. But I am also not so stupid as to not believe a story about Jack Sparrow as my college here."

"*Si*, I thought you'd like to hear it. I almost didn't believe my own eyes but then I saw *his* and I knew there was no doubt. I've heard stories about his eyes, as black as his ship and just as feared, for they saw through you and pierced through you deeper than any blade and they enchanted better than any mermaid song." Lopez said with a strained voice, his throat an ugly red that will definitely bruise. His eyes were focused on the silent Governor as he said the last part and Beckett's eyes flashed to him. "They seduced the two most powerful men in the Spanish Navy in the Caribbean,

to the point that this one did not even recognize him as a man. Is she not lovely, your *Jaquelin*?" Lopez snarled mockingly at Martinez, but the other Spaniard did not visibly react. "You were courting a Pirate Lord and not even ashamed of it!"

"The heart wants what it wants," Martinez told him with a cold smile and Lopez *gaped* at him. Yes, *gaped*, with the italics. For he had not expected that. "And if it means that two men loved the one which they should have hated, then yes, by all means, we were bewitched. But these are Spanish waters and you will not touch a single hair on his head or so help me God, you will regret it."

"So you are as much a traitor as *he* was," Hugo sneered but shut his mouth when the Governor casually pulled out a cocked gun and pointed it to his head.

"I don't think *you* can call anyone a traitor. Especially not a man born into his way of life."

"I speak not of the little whore, Martinez."

Said man's eyes flashed dangerously. "He was a better man than you ever were or could hope to be."

"And yet I'm alive and he is rotting with his ship." Martinez made to fire but he cried out in pain when Mercer beat him to it, throwing a knife into the shoulder of his gun hand, making the loaded pistol fall to the ground. The pistol released its shot and it nearly blew Lopez's big toe off had he not jumped away in time. Mercer advanced on the Governor, polishing a dagger as Beckett finally spoke up.

"You must know where he was heading. Tell me now and I will grant you clemency, never mention this little event and even give you a high position in the Company. If not, well, Mr Mercer will gladly get the information from you whether you want to give it or not."

"Go to hell, *hijo de diablo*." Martinez spat before taking out a small knife from his boots and cutting his own throat. He smiled a bloody smile, full of satisfaction and regret. But he was glad to have seen the one who warms his heart one last time and that his death will ensure a safe journey, for at least a little while longer. He closed his eyes and apologized to both 'Jaquelin' and Armando for leaving the pirate alone like this and wished desperately to have told him his feelings, despite knowing his heart already belonged to another. He had protected him as best as he could and now he must rest.

Beckett cursed in frustration at the corpse, tempted to kick him but he didn't want to dirty his shoes. It wasn't worth it. It would not get him any more information than he already had. Not that he didn't already have a charted course to Shipwreck Cove, having gotten it a few days ago from Sao Feng when the man failed to deliver to him the Black Pearl and possibly her resurrected Captain when they last met, instead needing a new ship for his crew after a clever trick done by Sparrow destroyed his and another pirate ship. Now there was no doubt that Sparrow and his precious ship were back but no one seemed to know whether he was heading for the Cove or not. And he still didn't know what the Brethren Court was for, if they had some secret weapon or if there was any way he could get them to come out of the protection of the Cove. Sao Feng was useless in that regard, as he could not convince a dead man to stay dead, let alone a feat like that.

"You know, I think I might know something that could help you." Hugo said as he gathered his wits about himself again. He sneered down at Martinez's body before focusing back to the three waiting men. "Rather, *someone*. We just need to make a little trip. It's not all that terribly far from here, maybe two days away, if we have good winds." Beckett regarded him with distrust and Lopez smirked. "Have I given you reason to doubt me so far, my Lord?"

"Very well, then. Jones," Beckett turned to the sea-creatures covered man, eyes narrowed seriously. "I do believe this port has been in Spanish hands long enough. Destroy anyone who stands in your way, collect as much new crewmen as you like but leave those who would swear their loyalty to the Company alive and bring them to me. You have three hours. We will then board your ship and you will take us to this place Mr Lopez is talking about in *one* day." With that, the short man left the room with Mercer in tow, leaving behind a growling Jones with a bruised Lopez and a dead Martinez.

The Dutchman's Captain then turned to the Spaniard, disgust clear in his slimy face. "Let th' dead be dead and th' cursed be cursed. Ya will find only pain and death down this path, Mr Lopez." He then turned around and walked straight through a wall, disappearing to his ship and starting an attack on poor San Angelica.

Hugo Lopez just smirked. "And so will he." He said to the empty room and the corpse before leaving. He had a journey to prepare for.

## Chapter 21

### Chapter Summary

Sparrington smut in the first part. You have been warned.

Neither man quite knew how they had ended up in the great cabin that night, pressed close together, James pressing Jack against the wall beside the door, the teen's hands divesting him of his clothing with an ease of practice, but neither were really questioning it as they kissed the living daylights out of each other. The tension brewing between them since that afternoon had nearly choked them at dinner, where they had both finally snapped and excused themselves to relieve some of it, only to find a make out session won't be enough. Luckily, the crew always ate below deck so they easily snook into the great cabin without anyone being the wiser, except maybe Frederico, who had seen them, and Tia Dalma, who seemed to see everything.

Jack's head was spinning as he kissed up James' neck while said older man's hands were working on divesting him of his own shirt, waistcoat and sash, his breathing coming out as harsh pants, his fingers in the other's soft hair. He was drowning in a way he hadn't in a long time and it made his nerves on edge. He was like a taunt string ready to snap and he growled at James when the man finally reached his trousers, bucking against him and managing to get them away from the wall. He used James' startled and disoriented state to guide them to the closest piece of furniture they could use as support or leverage and he pushed James against it.

It just so happened to be the big table Jack kept his maps on, not that he cared at the moment, as he practically ripped open Norrington's breeches and slid down to his knees, boldly and skillfully taking the taller man into his mouth and starting to work him like an expert. Norrington just stared down at him, mouth agape and eyes blown wide with lust, brain barely registering the incredible image as pleasure coursed through him. He let Jack do his thing, head falling back as he did his best not to thrust into that warm wetness, not wanting to disrupt his work or accidentally hurt him. But it was getting too much as the younger fondled his balls so the ex Commodore took hold of Jack's single big braid at the back of his head and made him let go, falling to his knees in front of the Captain.

Jack moaned into the kiss as James tasted himself on his tongue, melting into the older man until said older man grabbed him by his hips and dragged him forward. Sparrow arched when their hard pricks brushed against each other as Norrington held him close, mouthing at his neck and shoulders, scratching at the broad back when one hand cupped his bottom and the other tweaked a nipple. Not to be outdone, he leaned forward and tugged an earlobe into his mouth, playing with it while he let his hands explore every expense of the exposed skin he could reach, grinding their hips together until his hair was once again pulled on and glazed over green eyes met his.

With another kiss, James, without prelude, pushed a single finger into the tight heat of Sparrow's entrance and Jack released a loud gasp, somewhere between pain and pleasure. James kissed his forehead in apology for the rude intrusion, eyes searching for anything that could be used to ease the way and settling on the oil lamp sitting beside the maps over their heads. Without dislodging his partner, he reached up and managed to take it in hand, not spilling any of the warm oil on them, thankfully, and brought it down to eye level. Black eyes watched as he coated three fingers with it before removing the dry one and replacing it with a slick digit. It went in a lot more easily and Jack

was definitely moaning in pleasure now.

As he rode James' finger, Sparrow reached behind himself to grab the other's cock and started massaging it, managing to wring out quite a few moans despite the awkward position he was in. He smirked at the flushed and panting ex Commodore, knowing he can be a really minx in the sack, as Armando had always complained when he was driving him insane. But he brushed those memories and thoughts of the past aside, for this was no longer Armando, whose body he had known better than his own. This was James Norrington, this was now and he was not some replacement. Jack was too fond of him for him to just be replacement. So he leaned forward again and kissed his sweaty forehead, only to gasp as another finger joined the first and they struck right against his prostate.

James hesitated for a second, looking up at the scrunched up expression of his lover with worry. "Did I hurt you?" He asked in a ragged whisper, a hand already coming up to caress Sparrow's face in something akin to comfort. Jack just leaned into the warm, callous hand and shook his head.

"Please, do that again," he breathed out even quieter and huskier than his companion had, breathing coming out quick, heart beating even faster. Norrington complied and the Pirate Lord arched against him again, a quivering moan ripping out of him. Understanding what was going on, James continued his ministrations, kissing every part of Jack's face and whispering to him how beautiful he looked like this, in pleasure, on the edge and in danger of falling over at any second now. Had he not had a wholly different accent, he might have accidentally made Jack think he was back with his Spanish lover, since Armando used to whisper similar nonsense to him, only in Spanish. Jack chased away those thoughts by grinding hard against James' front and enjoying the growl that he received as his award. He drew Norrington in for a kiss as a third finger entered him, wincing minutely at the stretch. Good thing they had the oil.

Soon enough, James deemed his lover ready and pulled his fingers out, catching Jack's lips in a kiss as he lined up to his entrance, trying his damndest not to just thrust in like a savage beast in a rut. No matter how inebriated, he had never failed to think about his lover's pleasure before and he sure as hell wasn't going to start with Jack. He waited as patiently as he could for the pirate Captain to adjust before he started moving when Jack gave him a nod. He almost came then and there, with how hot it was and the friction that came from his prick sliding against Jack's tight walls, those silky muscles gripping him like a vice.

Jack was lightheaded as they began moving, lifting himself up and down Norrington's shaft as said ex Commodore helped him with the motions, breathy sighs or moans escaping them both. The heat filling him so fully was nearly melting him from the inside and he was loving every second of it, especially when they picked up the pace, even if only just the little. He wound his arms around James and dipped his head to kiss and suck at his chest, who in turn attached himself like a leech to Jack's neck and started working on a hickey that Jack couldn't currently be bothered to worry about covering in the morning. The cabin was soon filled with nothing but the sound of their panting breaths, moans and groans and the arousing melody of skin slapping against skin with increasing speed. The air smelled of musk and sweat, that perfect smell of sex that lingered a little too long and didn't let you clear your head after the deed was done, instead tempting you with another round.

And the teen was tempted for them to keep going like this until the second coming, if he could help it. Not even the pleased giggling of his beloved ship could clear up his mind enough for him to focus on anything other than James, who was peppering his face, neck, shoulders and upper chest with kisses and little suckles that left him weak in the knees. It only aroused him more when, weak-kneed as he was, James took over and did all the work, bodily lifting him just to slam him back down to his balls. Jack could do little else than kiss him and cry out when his prostate was hit.

It was becoming too much, his nerves were too stimulated. He wasn't going to let. Jack swore James was aiming to kill him with pleasure and he could barely hold on for the ride as his orgasm finally hit, half shouting, half gasping his lover's name. The contracting of his walls was enough to send James over the edge as well and he groaned Jack's name loudly in the man's shoulder, holding on tightly to him, shaking with his own peak.

For a while, all they could do was cling to each other desperately, as though that alone was keeping them grounded to earth, trying to catch their breaths and slow down their wildly beating hearts. When they finally managed to recover just a little bit, Jack took James' face in his hands and drew him in for a languid, soft kiss that spoke nothing of the frenzy they had just gone through. James was a little disturbed to see tears sliding down that beautiful face and he just held Jack tighter when more slipped out. He was already beating himself up for giving in and being so stupid as to take advantage of a youth grieving for his first lover when Jack wrapped his arms around him tighter and cuddled up to him.

"I'm happy," was all the teen said but it was said with such sincerity and relief that James relaxed and just kissed his temple affectionately.

The only regret either will have in the morning was falling asleep against the map table.

00000

"Are you *sure* this will get Sparrow to come out?" A skeptical Beckett enquired as he saw the cursed plague ship that was the Flying Dutchman approach a huge rock island with a big cave mouth on water level that sent chills down his spine even all the way over here. What was interesting was that not only he was uneasy about this ... place they were approaching, as even the half immortal crew of the Dutchman looked ready to bolt. Jones looked downright displeased but he had no fear of death, as he was immortal as long as ... whatever awaited them beyond these rocks didn't go for his heart. The short Lord was suddenly very doubtful of the wisdom of going to this place.

Lopez looked almost uncaring as he stood at gun point of two marines, who were more focused on the ominous feeling in the air than their target even as they pointed their muskets semi-steadily at his head. There was heavy, ugly, dark bruising on his neck as he watched the shadows play over this nightmarish course in the light of dawn as the sun slowly climbed up. Out of everyone on the ship, he looked most uncaring as to where they were going, as though this was something that did not even touch him in the slightest. He looked almost bored, if Cutler didn't know any better. He currently wore a better poker face than Beckett and Mercer combined.

"If this doesn't, then nothing ever will, Lord Beckett." Hugo told him almost pleasantly, although his words were in truth cold and impersonal. "If this doesn't get a reaction out of him, sir, then your lapdog has ruined him in the Locker. For this place possibly has more meaning to Jack Sparrow than his own home."

"For someone described to be the very epitome and corporation of freedom, I find it hard to believe Sparrow would ever value a place like this." One of Jones' men sneered, half fearful, half mocking of the puny mortal men they were forced to listen to. "This is a cursed passage that imprisons every man who is not yet ready to meet his end. And so very few are truly content to just die."

"This place be th' very definition of a cage. I should've left Sparrow here to rot." Jones sneered as well, growling at a missed opportunity. The Locker had a way out. A charted course. Mortals have found it a long time ago and had cleverly kept the secret to themselves, among pirates and no one else. All you need to escape the Locker is a good ship and a pilot smart enough to figure out the riddles people of old have left for future generations on the Mao Kun Map and Sparrow was

unfortunately for them in possession of both a good ship and the smarts needed to escape. All that is needed to snap a man out of his worst nightmare was the slightest interference with the norm of his punishment. Just one oddity in the routine could break the delirium. Still, a man must both be strong and willful enough to break out of it. Some men had continued living out their punishment on their own long after the Locker stopped repeating it. Just a month in that place was enough to break a person, no matter how strong or crazy they might have been in life. You had to be stronger or to have something anchoring you to whatever is left of your sanity to last in that place.

Perhaps his biggest mistake with Sparrow had been letting him go down with his ship. The Black Pearl was bound to Jack Sparrow's soul by a magic Jones could not comprehend and it had *always* been there. That is how Sparrow has never been blinded by tempests of men. Near or far, before their paths finally crossed or long after they were driven apart, it didn't matter. The Black Pearl carried her Captain's secrets and sanity. He should have just ignored Sparrow's bargain and let the damned thing burn. Now he has to chase a ship not even his own enchanted one can't catch across the seven seas for a midget that was near obsessed with the ship's rightful Captain. Yes, he should have just let her burn but he had been somewhat impressed with the true potential he saw in the man she had chosen to bind her meager spirit to. Rare few men heard the call of the sea as it was but rarer few still could hear the song of a ship. Not even Jones could until ... he bound himself to the Dutchman.

He hated his curse and he hated disturbing another cursed man even more. Some twenty years ago, he had felt pity for the poor souls in these wretched waters and he had taken mercy on them. This place was the only one he approached with the intentions of ferrying souls across. But there was one group of idiots that had refused and remain in their cursed state here to this day, often chasing him away from the mouth of the cave with warning shots that could not even properly reach him. After a while, he just stopped coming, waited for the piteous souls that were not affected by this cursed place to drift out of the cavern and then sent them on their merry way to the afterlife.

He was not at all happy to approach this place or to do what Beckett will no doubt ask. But he had his heart and Davy Jones, for all that he hated this curse and almost wished for death, was still human enough to fear it like any other man. Only a fool and a liar would claim otherwise. There are just some men who fear something more than death who chose to die instead of finding some unorthodox way to live forever.

"He wouldn't have stayed long." A man said from behind, voice raspy with the curse of the Dutchman's crew, hunched over a little and covered in sea creatures, pale as a corpse. Blue eyes glared defiantly at Jones, Beckett, Mercer and Lopez. Bootstrap Bill, William Turner Senior, looked far worse than the last time his son or Jack Sparrow saw him, but there was still a fire somewhere in his cold, cursed body, burning in him as determination and pure force of will kept him from fully succumbing to the curse of the Flying Dutchman. "He would have found a way to escape. He's Captain Jack Sparrow and a little cave like this would never be enough to hold him. Not if the Locker itself couldn't."

"You get back ta work, Mr Turner, or it will be the cat fer ya!" Jones snapped and two more 'sympathetic' crew members dragged the man away before he could be lashed to death. By the time Jones' grumbling stopped, they were at the mouth of the cave when Lopez called for them to stop.

"If we go any further in, there will be no more getting out." He told them as he looked out into the darkness of the cavern. The seabed beneath the dark water seemed to be glowing a hellish red and Beckett wondered if this was the entrance to hell. It sure could be mistaken for it, what with all the pointy, deadly rocks and the smell of decay, sulphuric and rotting wood. Just a dozen meters into the cavern, it was already too dark to see anything but outlines of shapes and less than a dozen more you couldn't see even that.



These were the uncharted waters no sane sailor wanted to sail into. Those of higher position in the Royal Navy didn't believe folktales and legends and rumors about this place but even they were not foolish enough to order something as suicidal as entering this particular cavern. No one knows *what* exactly sinks ships and devours men alive so only one ever survives and is washed out of and far away from the cave for a passing ship to find and rescue so he can tell the tale, but rare few ever can speak again after the terrors they see inside or they simply go so bonkers that people often put them out of their misery. Looking at the red lit water with shark like shapes swimming beneath the ship, Beckett cannot exactly blame them.

"What is it that we can find here and nowhere else?" The Lord of the East India Trading Company finally asked after a few minutes of eery silence and nothing happening, half losing his nerve and half losing his patience. Every day they dillydally here is a day Sparrow is closer to Shipwreck Cove, leaving Beckett none the wiser as to the Brethren Court's purpose or plan or what these ... *Nine Pieces of Eight* were. No pirate dared divulge that information, for they seem to believe it is a key to their eventual salvation and the EITC's demise, but they either don't know how or won't share the information, no matter what Cutler offers or what Ian does to them.

"Patience, my Lord. All will become clear soon enough. They must already know that we are here." Came the cryptic and unhelpful answer from Hugo, still staring out at the almost still waters inside the cave. The Dutchman was fighting to stay steady and in place instead of bashing itself on one of the deadly rocks that served like a doorway or a path that lead to the actual mouth and entrance to the cave.

"I fear I am losing my patience, with this wait and with *you*," Mercer, taking the hint, was already polishing one of his knives in threat. But Lopez just chuckled bitterly, eyes not straying from what they were focused on.

"Tell me, Lord Beckett, have you ever heard of a Capitán Armando Salazar? Of his Silent Mary?"

"I have indeed heard of the Butcher of the Sea, Mr Lopez."

"And have you heard of his demise?" When Beckett did not answer, he continued as though he had not even been expecting it. "I wouldn't be surprised if you didn't. The only stories still around are half remembered rumors and tavern stories no one really tells anymore. The Spanish Government and the King have made sure that the failure of their most successful, most powerful and most famous pirate hunter does not spread for fear of what it might suggest about Spain itself and her strength or weakness. For how strong can a country be when her mightiest captain was defeated by a mere pirate boy?"

"I thought Captain Salazar met his end in a horrendous maelstrom that sank his ship with all of his men." Mercer noted lightly although it could be seen in his eyes that he was not pleased his information was wrong. The Spaniard chuckled mockingly, disdainfully, at the mere notion of it.

"The Silent Mary was far mightier than any other ship to ever sail these waters. At least, one that was not in some way enchanted. A maelstrom would have damaged her but not sank her so completely that all traces of her were forever lost." He smirked over his shoulder at the Englishmen for a moment before looking back towards the dark. "No, it is not a force of nature that has ended Salazar, nor was it a god or goddess. It was a man, a *boy*. A boy of maybe eighteen summers and no more. I do not know the full details, either, as the story has been told and retold a thousand times over before it reached the first port and the first tavern, but I do know this. The ship was as fast as the wind itself, beautiful white sails that caught every last bit of the breeze and used it, a hull of strong but light brown wood almost the same color of cocoa made for cutting the waves, adorned in golden outlines on the deck and the railing with a figurehead of the same color holding

out a dove. And her captain was eighteen years old and the best and the craziest pilot to ever be blessed by the gods for he had led the Silent Mary right here, turned his ship around as if by magic and left the enemy to their death. And that boy still walks a free man today." He looked over his shoulder at them again, eyes mocking. "You might have even heard of him."

"Jack Sparrow," Davy Jones spat like a curse. Beckett had no reaction. He didn't know how he should react to these news. He had had the one person able to take down the Silent Mary in his employ and he had let him slip through his fingers like a fool. How *should* he react to finding this bit of information out? How *does* one react to learning that an already formidable enemy was even more formidable than originally thought.

He didn't get the chance to ponder this train of thought further for they saw something moving within the foggy darkness of the Devil's Triangle.

There was a scream.

## Chapter 22

James woke up sitting alone in the same place he had fallen asleep last night, covered by a blanket but his lover not in sight. Still, he knew Jack was still in the cabin merely from the sight of the tan leather boots in his line of vision and the discarded shirt and waistcoat, but their owner was not in his immediate vicinity. The ex Admiral let his brain clear up some of the sleepy haze as he absently stared at the dark brown waistcoat until a thought occurred to him when he thought he saw a shape of a different color on the inside. Not bothering with modesty or dignity when he wasn't sure if anyone could even see him now, Norrington shuffled over with the blanket half draped over his shoulders, wincing when his back protested after his uncomfortable sleeping position that had seemed so worth it just a few hours ago with Jack snuggled in his arms, as he finally picked up the waistcoat and spread it over the floor so he can examine it in the dull, dawn light coming from one of the portholes and the yellowish glow of a remaining lit oil lamp.

He searched for the same slightly different shade he had seen earlier and soon found it, right in the middle of the back on the inside of the coat. Two cutlasses crossed like on a pirate flag in a black stitching that nearly blended in with the dark brown of the waistcoat's material. James examined it more closely for the rose pattern but found it missing and wondered at the story Jack had told him. The black swords were nearly invisible as he looked at them. How had Martinez spotted them so casually when James had searched for the stitching with eyes and touch together, and from a distance when it was discarded with the intention of hiding? Why would he have mistaken it as a heraldic symbol of some noble family? Did Jack really steal the waistcoat? Where was the rose?

Jack said he had made a flag/banner in this design and to match the dress for the simple purpose of confirming 'Jaquelin's' story when he and Armando were invited to a ball Martinez was hosting. Was there already some finished flag and Jack just ... told the tailor to stitch on the swords? Or was the rose stitched on to a banner that already existed? Which part of Sparrow's story was true? Was any of it? Somehow James doubted Jack would just play along with a lie that was not his own and wing it so dangerously as to pretend to be some random noble born woman. Not even the reckless older Jack would do that.

The faintest sound of trinkets and beads being moved in the wind alerted him to the fact that Jack was indeed still in the cabin and James looked up and towards the sound. He was standing near one of the portholes, dressed only in his pants, looking out at the sea through the window as the morning breeze, chilly as it was, played with his hair. Strangely enough, James noted, he was not facing in the direction he had been staring off into for the entire journey since they found him de-aged on that random island they had washed up on after being spat out of the Locker.

For a moment, James was mesmerized by the tattoos on display. He had noticed them last night, of course - had ran his tongue over some of them, following their shapes and patterns on skin covering lithe muscles, had wondered at the story behind each one - but only now did he get to really *look* at them. A good part of Jack's upper back and shoulders was covered in text, but James was too far away and the light was too dim for him to make out the small print aside from seeing that it had been done by a sure, steady, elegant hand and that it was probably done some time ago. Around Jack's right bicep was a strange black circle whose insides were at places not painted to make out designs that made no sense whatsoever to Norrington. He had a chain-like design around his lower left bicep and another circle on his left shoulder blade, the design of that one ... nearly resembling two cutlasses with some flowery designs around them in seemingly concentrated circles. No, not really flowery. Just random designs to mask the shape of the two crossed swords to an uninterested eye.

James knew Jack had more tattoos on his front but his eyes focused on the circles on his right bicep and the one on his left shoulder blade. Something in his mind insisted those two were important. He wondered if he should ask Jack or not, looking back at the spread waistcoat. Had this Armando known?

"Ah, I see you're awake." Jack commented, looking over to the older man with a small smile. "Interested in the design, are you?"

"More the story you told me. I can't help but wonder how much of it is the truth and what is clever fiction." James admitted, tracing the almost invisible cutlasses. "I can't understand how someone can see the stitching. I'm touching it and this close yet it is hard for me to see it." It was as much a dare as a comment or an inquiry and Jack surprised him by answering.

"Alright, I may have lied a little about the meaning behind the flag but not all of it." Sparrow said as he walked back over to James, sitting down beside him and leaning against his side, eying the piece of clothing in front of them. Norrington did his best not to get distracted by the proximity of the younger male and instead forced himself to focus on the matter at hand. "The swords ... They are mine. My father's. My Grandmama's. My great grandfather's. Anyone who has ever sailed under my family's colors. Like a mark. A sign of belonging to one group of pirates. The rose I ordered so it would look more ... noble like. Like a crest, an emblem. A heraldic symbol of power and higher upbringing. I told you I found the dress and decided to make a flag in the same color. I just added some flair to it all. The swords, in all right, should be white as the bones and skull on a pirate flag but since I often ran away from home, my Da always insisted I wear this symbol hidden in plain sight. It was for the best. They couldn't use me against the rest of my family."

"Like my family wanted to." James added, recalling their first argument about Fitzwiliam and his little espionage mission.

Jack nodded absently as he took his waistcoat and folded it neatly and with care. "Yeah, only your family wanted to lure him in to kill him. My Da, that is. The rest would want something far more ... Well, valuable wouldn't be the right word but something like it. They would force Da's hand. And while I wouldn't have believed it when I was twelve, my Da *would* do whatever they wanted to ensure my safety. So we hide our relationship, never acknowledging each other as father and son, never talking to each other unless necessary. I wonder if that changed, over the years?" He mumbled to himself, a slightly hopeful gleam in his eyes. He was sick of not being able to speak openly with his own father. They rarely saw each other and yet they had to keep a distance between themselves, keep it all business with no warmth or familiarity. It was always that one thing Jack had hoped he could grow out of, his father's need to be so overprotective of him. Then again, he knew it was a futile hope but he still would like for at least the whole secrecy thing stopped.

He hated Fitzwiliam for being the sole reason his father will never get to act like his father again. Jack hoped wherever he and Lawrence Norrington were that they were suffering from fleas and plagues.

"It looks familiar." James argued, furrowing his brow in thought. He *knew* he saw it somewhere before, perhaps a very long time ago. He still was sure he had seen it and he was ready to bet on it. "I know I must have seen these swords somewhere before."

"You probably have, love. It's not as uncommon as you might think." Jack grinned, knowing there was indeed a lot of men wearing this symbol on some article of their clothing. There were at least half a dozen in every port in the world! Some even in more inland towns. Shipwreck Cove had to stay in touch with the rest of the world, after all.

James decided not to dwell on it any further and instead stood up, dragging Jack with him. He was

pleasantly surprised that he was not sticky and wondered just *when* Jack had woken up to clean them both up. His eyes trailed over the smaller man's torso and the accumulation of tattoos there, wondering if any of them should be considered special but his mind was still stuck on the two circles. One was a hidden heraldic symbol marked on Jack's very skin, claiming him as his family's. What was the other?

He thumb traced the healthy, smooth skin under the flying sparrow in the sunset tattoo that screamed to the world who this pirate was. So he had not yet met Beckett. He was still a free man who could be on either side of the law, depending on how he chose and how inconspicuous he remained. He was not yet branded a pirate but was still no less a pirate now than he was twenty years older.

Jack watched him with intrigued black eyes, head cocked to the side, wondering what it was James was tracing on his skin. Seeing that his lover was distracted, Jack leaned up and kissed him under the jaw, enjoying how James started at the action, snapping back to attention. He smiled wickedly as he started pulling James towards the bed. There were some hours still before the Crossing and before Jack was needed on deck to make sure no one wrecks his beloved ship. James went with a throaty chuckle, tackling Jack as they fell on the bed, the two a bit preoccupied by each other to notice an object going through a slight tremor on the map table.

The Compass, unattended, was trembling, its needle shuddering, its owner completely oblivious to the change and the danger it was warning about.

00000

The first scream was soon followed by others, men shouting in panic as a ... *monstrosity* sailed towards the Flying Dutchman, easily almost twice its size and no doubt having twice as many men and cannons aboard. The mortal sailors were uselessly shooting their muskets at the approaching *shipwreck*, only the most basic of skeletal remains of its hull supporting the decks, the masts almost titting dangerously, looking somewhere between ready to snap and snapped. The sails on said masts were torn up and burned through in places, darkened gray from their previous no doubt pristine white color, a giant eagle painstakingly carefully woven in a previously dark reddish color that was now more black than it will ever be red again. The floorboards of the main deck were missing in some places, broken in others, burned to cinders in others still. The railing was apparently blown up in some spots. Some of the remaining infrastructure of the hull showed signs of cannon fire, others of obviously being crushed against the protruding rocks from the dark, dark, red lit sea. The lava from the underwater volcano must have done the final blow to this once magnificent ship, for it was charred so badly it was nearly as black as the Black Pearl.

More terrifying than this cursed vessel were the men manning her. *Ghosts*. Apparitions from hell itself, solid yet undying. Dressed in black, parts of their bodies missing yet what is left of those body parts still operating as though they were whole and connected to the rest of the body, the leftover skin on their faces and hands either blackened or blue from their watery grave. Black slime dribbled from their mouths, their hair and clothing floating about as though they were still underwater, somehow both soaked and dry as they stalked and boarded from one cursed ship to another. They cannot be killed by stabs and cuts and guns and dismemberment. They spat curses and vile sounding words in Spanish at the combined crew of ordinary English sailors and the cursed crew of the Flying Dutchman. The few foolish men who dared attack them were cut down like rabid dogs by rusted swords. Soon enough, the entire front of the ship was swarming with these black, cursed ghosts, the rest of the free men too afraid to dare approach them. Beckett found himself surrounded with Mercer, Jones and both EITC men and the Dutchman's unlucky crew, facing certain death.

But it never came. Instead, the Spanish curses turned into an outright uproar as half of the weapons were pointed at one only slightly disturbed Hugo Lopez, the rest keeping Jones and the others at bay. A tapping of a cane against the wooden planks stopped any further chaos and everything fell eerily silent, only that echoing tapping and the sound of heavy, booted footsteps filling in the creepy atmosphere.

A tall man, as cursed as the rest, came to stand in front of the other ghosts, facing the only living Spaniard aboard both cursed ships. The skin of his once handsome face was hideously cracked, blue and no longer a visage of what it once had been. Long, flowing black hair was no longer held back by a hair tie as it had been in life, instead floating around the man as though with the waves under both ships. A part of his head was missing, as though blown apart by an explosion and some lighthearted sailor vomited his dinner up right there on the deck when he saw it. The Spanish ghosts sneered at him but made no other noise in respect of the man now on deck. His jacket was now as black as the rest of the crew's, when it had once been striped with horizontal white patches to indicate his rank. The few decorations still adorning his proud chest were as rusted and charred as the rest of him. He walked with a limp that had never existed in his living years. His lips were blue with cold, water and death and his eyes flashed with rage terrifying enough that Hugo's impassiveness finally faded, replaced with the paleness of fear.

"Capitán Hugo Lopez, you *dare* come here to mock *me*?!" The man thundered, tapping his cane twice on the wooden boards of the Dutchman's deck and Beckett watched in horror as two men were killed in cold blood, one an EITC marine, the other a cursed sailor of the Flying Dutchman. Jones made no reaction but the thinning of his lips while Mercer held desperately tightly to his weapon, although he did his best not to show how petrified he actually was. "I should execute a traitor like you here were I stand!"

"Capitán, señor, please have mercy!" Lopez cried out as the larger Spaniard took hold of his neck and unsheathed his sword, preparing to follow through with his words.

"Mercy? *Mercy*!? There is no mercy for a traitor like you, you wretched pirate scum!"

"*Señor, por favor!* Capitán, show mercy!" The desperate man begged but to no avail. The other Spaniards watched with disgusted sneers on their ghostly, cracked faces, no pity or sympathy for what appeared to have once been their comrade. "Capitán! I beg you!"

"*Adios, Lopez,*" the man said as he drew back his sword, ready to pierce Hugo's heart when the only alive Spaniard cried out the one thing that could have saved his life.

"I saw him! I saw *him*, Capitán! I saw him!"

The Captain of the ghost crew and the skeleton ship stopped - ironically - dead in his tracks, his sword only piercing Hugo's clothing and nicking the skin underneath. Hugo hissed at the sting but dared not move or say anymore as the dead man stared blankly at him for a long moment before a ... peculiar look lit up his eyes. Seeing the one chance to save his miserable life, Lopez continued babbling.

"I saw him, Capitán. I saw him. I saw him. Him. I saw him, Capitán. I saw the one who destroyed your Silent Mary." He sighed in relief when he was put back onto his own two feet, no matter how shaky they might have been. "I saw Jack Sparrow, Capitán Salazar."

"Jack Sparrow," came the raspy almost whisper from the ghost of the once great Capitán Armando Salazar, now no more than a ghost of his former self. Quite literally, at that. The face of rage became blank in the blink of an eye and Beckett briefly wondered what Jack had done to this one. Other than kill him and utterly destroy his reputation by defeating him the way he had. The legend

of El Matador Del Mar all but disappeared some time before Beckett met Jack Sparrow for the first time. What was the story behind the way that single name affected Salazar to this point.

"Yes, I saw him. I saw him, Armando-aargh!" He didn't get to finish the less formal version of his earlier plea for life, for Salazar had stabbed him through with his rusty sword mercilessly, the cold glint back in his eyes. "Ca-capitán!" The wounded man gasped desperately, looking up with shocked eyes at the pride and joy and *star* of the Spanish Navy with pleading eyes.

Salazar leaned in closer to the dying man and whispered with his chilly breath into the man's ear. "You shall never lay eyes on him again, traitorous scum." With that promise, Salazar threw the man overboard and he sank, dead cursed sharks coming to tear apart his body before the life could even fully seep out of him. The British men were already shaking in fear when he turned to them and they all fell to the deck, begging for their lives pathetically. Sick of their whining and sniveling, Salazar tapped his cane against the deck three more times and his men killed three of the groveling men, making the rest go mute with fear. Satisfied with the silence, the Spanish Captain turned back to the three men 'in charge', appraising them with critical eyes before they narrowed dangerously at Jones. He tapped his cane twice and two of the cursed crewmen of the Flying Dutchman were hurled overboard, dragged to the fiery depths by Salazar's pet zombie sharks. Their screams echoed even above water and Jones even flinched at the sound. "I have warned you not to come back here, *hombre*. Yet you did not listen and now your men are paying the price. You *dare* bring me that mockery of my life," he pointed with his cane to where he had thrown Sanchez. "*Here*? You and anyone else are not wanted here, Davy Jones. Take your little *amigos* and *leave* before I order for you to be executed, one by one."

"I am no more willin' to be here than ya are, Spanish." Jones spat angrily, pointing an accusing and half threatening claw at Beckett. "It's 'is damned fault I 'ave ta suffer yer presence an' ya mine."

Salazar in turn then cast his eyes on the shortest man there, arching an eyebrow at the clear fear, but also calculation he could see there. This one made even him, a ghost, uneasy. "And what is your purpose here, *hombre*? What could possibly lead you to come here?"

"I believe that ... Mr Lopez has led us here to speak with you." Beckett actually had the balls to admit and all of his men flinched when the ghost Captain's eyes flashed, his hand twitching on his cane, as though just *itching* to tap-tap-tap the deck and send even more men to their deaths. Which actually seemed to be the case, as the crew of the Silent Mary were preparing for that order to be given at any second. Knowing that any more stalling will only cost more men, Beckett hurried to continue, hoping he will survive this encounter. "I wish to make a proposal to you, Captain."

Salazar's hand stilled, looking at the little Lord shrewdly. "And what is this proposal you have for me, señor ... ?"

"Lord Cutler Beckett, actually. Of the East India Trading Company." Growing bolder by not being struck down yet, Beckett extended an almost shaking hand for the Spaniard to shake. He hastily drew it back when Salazar looked tempted to cut it off, his eyes flashing dangerously again. The Englishman wondered why but dared not ask.

"The East India Trading Company," the ghost drawled as though it were a peculiarly foul tasting poison on his tongue but was too polite to outright spit it in Beckett's face. "And why should I degrade the honor of my men and my ship by considering any of your proposals, señor Beckett?"

"*Excuse* me?" Before he could stop himself, Cutler seethed into the dead man's face ... or rather chest, since he could only reach about that high. Needless to say, the Spaniard wasn't impressed. "And that's *Lord* Beckett to you."

"That's nice." Came the sarcastic, sardonic reply, the cane lifting over the deck. A man whimpered somewhere behind the two Englishmen and the Captain of the Flying Dutchman. "You have not answered my question, or given me a good enough reason to keep you alive yet. And I am finding my patience rather ... see through these days."

Swallowing the fear due to his bruised pride, Beckett lifted his chin, as though that would make him look more intimidating or impressive. The ghost of a man with an eye patch sneered behind Salazar, who only arched a brow once again, as if in challenge. Beckett, foolish as he was, was ready to take it. "Captain Jones over here informs me that he can free you from this place as long as a bargain is struck. As you can probably guess, I control the Dutchman now." If he had expected the Capitán to react, he was disappointed when his face didn't change from its impassive expression. Beckett's lips thinned. "You can strike a bargain with me that I assure you would be most profitable and satisfactory to us both."

"Capitán, let us just slaughter the English pigs and we can go back to the way it was before!" One of the other ghosts called out and a man started bawling at the rear end of the Dutchman. A bead of sweat was trailing down Mercer's face as he held his weapons in a tight, turning shaky grip.

"But if you do that, you won't get your chance for revenge!" Beckett hoped he sounded as persuasive as he'd heard Sparrow being in the past, or at least as half as. That man could get anything he wanted if he truly bothered to bargain for it, which he rarely did. Even to save his own hide.

Salazar paused, his men looking amongst each other. Beckett counted it as a win on his part. "Revenge?" The cursed ghost asked, as though confused, but Beckett neither noticed nor cared. He was sure he had found the right leverage. The Flying Dutchman had not been enough for him. The Silent Mary was too tempting a ship in his service to ignore.

"Yes. You see, I'm leading a campaign against piracy, but they have all ran and hid in this supposedly neigh impenetrable fortress-"

"The Shipwreck Island." Salazar cut in knowingly, feeling the stirrings of amusement somewhere deep down. Not that it showed.

"Yes." Beckett answered, trying to keep his irritation at bay. "And the only one who I'd expect to be able to drag them out escaped me without the chance for a bargain. Or for my own revenge." He met those strange, dark eyes with his own, holding the piercing gaze as best as he could. "I've been told that if *anyone* can get a reaction out of this person, who is our common enemy, it's *you*." He could see stirrings of interest in Salazar's demeanor so he quickly added. "Think about it. I hear we share a goal: to rid these waters, and all others, of pirates for good. You can get your revenge if only you sail with me to Shipwreck Cove. Do we have a deal?"

"And who might this person be, that is our common foe?" Salazar asked even as his hand extended, as if ready to shake on it but refusing to go in blind. Cutler smiled. He could get used to some intelligent company. He got it so rarely since the day he met Sparrow. No one seemed to compare to his sharp wit and sharper tongue. Admiral James Norrington had showed promise, as had young Miss Swann, but they were both far too naive to the ways of the world. Perhaps a man who had been Jack's enemy might provide better company.

"Jack Sparrow."

A murmur seemed to rise like a hurricane over the ghost crew as soon as the name was uttered, glances exchanged, weapons gripped tighter, mouths pulled into a thin line, eyes narrowed in distaste. Salazar had gone stiff, only his hair moving with nonexistent winds - or waves, in this



particular case. Then a slow smile, gruesome in its black slime dripping case as it was, spread across his face and Beckett was sure he was staring at death. He almost felt sorry for Jack Sparrow. It was clear all these men wanted revenge for their deaths. But Beckett found himself eager to see Jack Sparrow brought down a peg or two.

He almost started when Salazar seized his hand and shook it firmly, his fingers cold.

"We have an accord, señor Beckett."

Cutler was too relieved to bother with correcting him on his title. The Flying Dutchman lurched backwards when Jones started barking orders, clearing up the way for the Spanish galleon to exit, for the first time in twenty years, the darkness of the Devil's Triangle and sail into the daylight.

Salazar's smile looked even more terrifying now that the men could see it clearly in the early morning light.

"I'm coming for you, Jack the Sparrow."

00000

The needle of one special Compass, leagues away, jerked once before it started moving.

## Chapter 23

When James woke up again, it was once again to an empty blanket beside him and no young lover by his side as he sat up in the great cabin on the Black Pearl. He could hear her Captain, though, shouting orders above on the quarterdeck, no doubt at the helm, which meant they must already be close to this infamous Crossing the pirates feared and dreaded so much. Seeing as Jack didn't seemed bothered by it and was relatively calm about the supposedly deadly passage, James hadn't really heeded the worried murmurs among the crew or how uneasy Barbossa seemed about it. Elizabeth, Will, Theodore and Philip were as clueless as James was about what could possibly be so scary, but Frederico seemed interested enough in it to ask a few questions of good ol' Mr Gibbs.

Gibbs had, naturally, been all too happy to supply him with answers, answers that the whole crew had listened to as Jack had been too busy talking with Tia Dalma, just a few days ago.

"Ya see, Mr Sanchez, not everyone could've found th' Cove. Th' Island itself is neigh unapproachable if ya don't know these parts well. There are rare few captains spawned outside of Shipwreck Cove these days that know how to make the Crossing." He had explained. "We call it the Devil's Throat, fer it will surely swallow ya whole, no survivors, if ye're not careful 'nough. No one who is not directly taught by another who is experienced at makin' th' Crossing can enter th' Cove. 'Tis why it's such an impenetrable fortress! Only those who already know how ta do it can teach another. No matter yer luck or how much ye be blessed by th' gods, ye cannot make the Crossing if ya haven't done it b'fore or haven't been shown how ta. It keeps the enemies out. Even if they *can* approach Shipwreck Island, which I doubt is very probably considering how it was named, the Devil's Throat will take care of anyone foolish 'nough to try and brave it."

"An' it's even protected by powerful enough magic t' keep anythin' not human out, no matter how powerful it be." Barbossa had thrown in as he passed them by while Gibbs was talking about the Crossing. "Not even the Flying Dutchman can enter those waters."

Of course, many more questions from the all around frightened crew had followed, the main one being the most obvious: had anyone present ever done the Crossing? They had all half expected Barbossa and maybe Gibbs to say they have, but no such words left their mouth. Before the panic could set in, Frederico had called for Sparrow to see if he knew how and Jack had replied *of course* he did, not only was he Captain Jack Sparrow but he *grew up* in there. He could get in or out with nothing but a dingy and had actually done that before. Gibbs had been pale at hearing this and had drank his entire flask up in a few swallows before muttering something about being too old for this. Jack had in turned called out to him that it had happened before they even met and Gibbs had no retribution to fear.

"'E says that now. I'll be dead b'fore I breathe five minutes of the Cove's air," had been the old sailor's grumbled reply before he left the group to wonder at the strange conversation, if it can even be called that.

That had been yesterday, which meant that the Crossing was probably in sight or already underway. James quickly gathered his clothes and dressed, washed his face and checked if he was presentable on the very mirror he had held during the fight against the El Arquero more out of inbred habit than any sense of vanity before he joined the crew on the deck. His jaw very nearly joined Elizabeth's, Will's and his two young Lieutenants' when he caught sight of the enormous cave mouth they were just entering. It was suddenly deathly silent on the ship, as though a switch had been flipped, no one daring making any noise but the wind as it pushed the Black Pearl deeper into this ... deadly passage. It indeed deserved its name, for it resembled the gates of hell

accurately enough. Spikes, protruding rocks, the remains of wrecked ships, that's the sight that greeted them as Jack confidently led his ship into this graveyard of foolish sailors.

"Oh my god," Groves gasped from somewhere near the railing on the starboard side, seeing skeletons stuck on giant rock spikes, their entire gut area stabbed through by the sharp minerals. There were hundreds of human remains all over the place and it sent a chill down the spines of the men and woman watching this. Tia Dalma wasn't bothered, but those who practice the dark arts of voodoo are often more familiar with death than other men are comfortable with. Jack, also, wasn't really bothered, as he had seen the Devil's Throat enough times in his youth for it to be a normal scenery to him. He was, however, counting the new poor bastards and unfortunate ships that had joined the collection of the Devil's Throat since the last time he - as his eighteen year old self - had seen it.

"How did the pirates even find out there was anything more behind this ... *nightmare*?" Gillete could be heard asking from the same direction as Theodore but James could not take his eyes off of his lover. De-aged or not, Captain Jack Sparrow looked like he belonged nowhere more than he did at the helm of his ship, easily guiding her around the rocks that had been the doom of so many a other good sailors. He didn't seem the least bit worried and he was the one who would grieve the most if the Pearl were to sink again.

"It be the first Brethren Court that found this place, Mr Gillete," Barbossa said as quietly as he can while still being heard. They all feared that if they were to be loud enough, they will somehow disturb this seemingly magically ease with which the Black Pearl was avoiding certain doom.

"Many decades ago. Legends say that a demon from hell 'ad been chasin' 'em an' the future first Pirate King 'ad hid in this very passage but that he 'ad ta go in deeper and deeper as more an' more ships followed his lead, seein' that 'e were safe. An' so, naturally, after a while they stumbled upon the inside of this 'hell' as you so accurately described it. The future first Brethren Court staked claim ta it an' it's been ours ever since."

"Was there really a demon chasing them?" The ever pirate-curious-and-fascinated Groves asked in barely a whisper as they indeed passed a wreckage that could be said to be old enough to fit Barbossa's story. Almost two centuries have passed since those first few ships sailed into this very passage and named it the Devil's Throat for only a third of the ships that made that first Crossing had remained intact when they finally reached the other side. The first nine to make it to the other side were the first nine Pirate Lords. Jack explained as much from his place at the helm, completely ignoring how fearful everyone looked at his loud voice.

"Relax, mates. I've made the Crossing thousands of times before."

"Yes, but never when one o' us could see it, ya little cur! So stop talkin' and concentrate on gettin' us through!" Jack rolled his eyes at his fellow Pirate Lord, not even bothering to reply. By now, he could make the Crossing with his eyes closed, especially if it was with his beloved vessel. She sang smugly as she sailed through the wrecks of other, slower, weaker ships that had not made it, sauntering past them as though she were a queen walking through her court of faithful, loyal servants. If Jack were indeed to close his eyes, she would guide his hand with her voice and they would make the Crossing just as well.

"I think Witty Jack knows wot 'e be doin'." Tia Dalma called to them with a wicked smile, making it clear she was oh so enjoying their fear. "Relax. Dere be no mermaids in dese waters. Not dat any could tempt Witty Jack. Or dat dey would. We be in safe hands."

"It's nothing against Jack, on my part." A ghostly pale Will told her in a tight voice. "I just ... don't like the vibes of this place."

"Dat be de death. Ever since Davy Jones stopped ferryin' souls, dey be stuck 'ere. Witty Jack once brought me 'ere ta help dem local witch an' shaman an' voodoo priest excercise de souls from da Crossin', since dey be scaryin' good captain's inta makin' stupid mistakes." The jungle beauty shrugged indifferently as her eyes rowed over the decaying ships and their crews. "Powerful magic keep 'em out. Da feelin' stays." Gibbs crossed himself three times, did some stupid and funny chicken dance and spat over the railing of the Black Pearl. Tia Dalma and Jack rolled their eyes simultaneously before they carried on with their business.

"I've only ever heard snippets of rumors about the Shipwreck Cove before." Elizabeth told Will as she guided him over to where Theodore and Philip had migrated to James, who had finally stopped staring at Jack. He hoped he hadn't been too obvious, but judging by the wicked twinkle in Frederico's eyes, he might not have succeeded in seeming discreet. "I've never imagined I'd get to see it myself."

"I wonder how Sparrow is taking all of this so lightly?" Philip more commented than mused, staring up at said Captain with grudging admiration that he would never admit to.

"Well, he *did* say he grew up here. It was probably one of the first things he learned." Turner offered awkwardly, trying not to show just how unnerved the deadly Crossing made him. He felt ashamed and inadequate in comparison to the laid back Jack, who even seemed to be humming to himself in a very carefree manner. He envied him that level of confidence, in himself and in his skills. Will still at times paused in hesitation before making that first swing with his hammer when he was making something in a smithy.

"No, I didn't quite mean that, although I have to commend him for being so coolheaded when the rest of us are losing our heads with worry and panic." Gillete grunted. "No matter his experience, he is still only eighteen. Should this be a normal situation, regarding a normal ship and a normal eighteen year old lad, it would be *him* going crazy, not us. But I guess he could never be quite as normal as he'd like to become. He *is* Captain Jack Sparrow. Something tells me you have to be *born* that mad. But that's not what I meant."

"They what did you mean?" James inquired with a cocked eyebrow of interest.

"I meant, all of this." He gestured vaguely to encompass the entire situation of the past couple of weeks. "Spell or no spell, eccentric or not, no man should take all of this as in stride as he had. *Twenty years*, James! That's practically a lifetime! No matter what he had seen, he should be freaking out right about now. I know I would have been. *Especially* if I had as crazy a life as Sparrow's."

Norrington felt his lips thin as the others started realizing that Gillete was right. He stayed quiet, letting them talk amongst themselves while his eyes kept straying from the Black Pearl's innocent seeming crow's nest to her cheery Captain. Only he, she, Tia Dalma and possibly Gibbs or Frederico knew just how *hard* Jack was taking some of these things. Jack was relying heavily on his seeming soul-deep connection with the Black Pearl to keep his head above the water. For all that every rational part of James' brain protested the idea of the ship being in any way sentient, he could not lie to himself well enough to forget or explain away that first night in the crow's nest, when he had clearly felt her shudder when Jack had needed comforting and how the teen had immediately been a bit more relaxed. He had felt her doing it a few times after that as well. Let the others call it crazy, but James *knew* Jack was suffering and trying to do it quietly as he fought to comprehend a world twenty years ahead of him. Since no one could tell him what he had done in *all* of those twenty years, not even the Pearl - there was a decade long gap between their two meetings and James wasn't sure Jack ever told her everything he had lived through just to get her back - he had to make connections on his own, establish a time line of events he was not even yet

aware of and try to figure out just *why the bloody hell* Davy Jones and some random Englishman were after him.

Yes, Jack was probably taking this whole thing too much in stride for normal standards, but Norrington agreed with Gillete on one thing: he *was* Captain Jack Sparrow, the most crazy and most eccentric man in the world. He was probably *born* so different that no matter his upbringing, he would have ended up the exact same way he was right now.

It took them about three hours to make the Crossing, that was how long the Devil's Throat was. They saw many more wrecks along the way and they kind of got used to it. Well, at least enough that they were no longer so horrified by the sight as they had been when they saw the first dozen or so. It was like a museum of ships, some at least twice as old as the Pearl probably was, not that Jack had ever shared his lady's age. That was just rude and improper. But at the end of that museum came the really incredible sight that was the Town of Shipwreck within the Shipwreck Cove itself.

Jack grinned at his home, steering his beloved ship towards the docks reserved for the nine Pirate Lords and the Keeper of the Code. "Welcome to Shipwreck Cove, maties!" He called cheerfully to the awestruck group. Rare few had ever entered the Cove, for 'ordinary' pirates only ever came here when the song has been sung and the Brethren was meeting or if they were to be judged by the Keeper for a grave affront against the Code. Their reaction was expected, for what a sight it was to behold!

Despite it being located inside a gigantic cavern that made up almost the whole of the island, Shipwreck Cove was amazingly well lit. Some of the first pirates who had followed the first Pirate Lords through the deadly Devil's Throat had been disgraced scholars, hunted for their scientific words against the laws of nature the Church approved or against the laws of men that the Crown sanctioned. So artists, scientists, poets, engineers and many, many other common but witty men turned to piracy to save their necks. Some of them had worked out an ancient Egyptian trick, a system of mirrors to increase the amount of light a single ray of sunshine could produce. That, combined with the strange crystals growing in most of the openings where sunlight even penetrated into the cavern, was used to light up the entire Cove, making it as sunny as it was outside, if not more. At night, when there is no other natural light but the moon and the stars, which were not nearly enough to light up a cavern the size of Shipwreck Cove, a few of the other men had made small mirror-disks the likes of which were used for lighthouses, placed them around some of the crystals that *don't* grow in the openings in the walls of the cavern - no need to alert anyone that a secret island was right there in the middle of the night, if a ship was passing by - and simply lit lamps right next to the crystals. It had much the same effect and, depending on the days and moments, certain amounts of these lamps were lit.

Another oddity of the Cove was the architecture. Even after a good number of men were trained properly to make the Crossing, people still managed to crash their ships in the docks of the Town of Shipwreck. There was just too many pointy ricks all over the place but the wrecks were starting to stack up a little. Being practical and all, another group of those educated people were assigned to see what they can use of the ships without having to tear them apart, for that cost time and some of the material integrity. So some smartass had decided to stack the ships together - don't ask how, as even the oldest of pirate residents of the Cove have no idea - and make a giant citadel from it in the most visible spot in the Cove. That just so happened to be the very middle of it, on a bunch of pointy rocks. After a good number of wrecks were stacked as a solid enough foundation, the Citadel was built and today it was the tallest building in the Cove, made out of no less than fifty shipwrecks. The intriguing thing is that the spikes it was built on varied from two to twenty meters in high, so you can imagine how some of those spikes were still visible at random angles among the wrecks. It also somehow made the whole structure infinitively more stable. There was not a

strong enough earthquake to move one *floorboard* out of place, let alone anything bigger. All the shipwrecks were lit up so everyone can see it, for the sole purpose to prevent any idiot from managing to hit his ship against *that*. And *yes*, it *was* needed for it had actually *happened* once.

Another thing that set apart this particular harbor from any other in the world was that it had ten lighthouses around the Citadel and ten more corresponding ones on the outskirts of the outer circle of the cove. Three bridges connected the Citadel with the rest of the Cove and only one was permanent. The other two were mobile bridges, moved aside to let ships and boats pass. Everything was better lit than some ballroom for a royal party and it was done a lot more cheaply, too.

The other buildings in the Cove ... Well, they were all bigger than one would expect of a pirate only port. The smallest house had three floors, the biggest - only half as high as the Citadel - having five to six, depending on where they were built. They looked more than decent enough. If anyone expected a port like Tortuga, they were greatly mistaken, for the streets were clean and orderly - as much as any port town can be - and there was what appeared to be a regular guard. Jack tried not to look at the crossed cutlasses on many a men's clothing and hoped James would be too distracted by the signs that clearly stated that the Cove had a bank, a Library, a jail, a courthouse - or something like it - and even a church and various other temples for other religions like any other 'civilized' port to notice the repeating symbol. He didn't need him asking questions right now when he did not have all the answers himself. Shipwreck Cove, of course, had a street for her craftsmen, just like any other town did these days, too, although they had only a couple of them and none of them made any fancy shmancy hats, coats, gloves or things like that. The fanciest thing you can find within the Cove *were* those crossed cutlasses that Jack was trying very hard not to feel the burn of on his skin from the back of his west and on his right bicep.

There were more smaller caverns connected to the big one that held more housing for the pirates that lived here or came often enough to own a house. It also provided for more docking places for ships in times like these. The Cove itself had been adapted to its inhabitants and there were bridges and ropes high over the Town of Shipwreck that the Keeper's men used to go about their daily business. One such business being the mail and delivery of lighter packages through various birds, including pelicans and alabasters. Anything heavier than what a pelican can carry was either brought by ships or by highly trained marine creatures, such as giant sea turtles, dolphins and seals. Once again, *many* a men to make the first Crossing with the first nine Pirate Lords were educated people. They taught the rest of the Cove inhabitants how to train the animals and so Shipwreck Cove had possibly the best marine mailing system in the world.

Another thing unique to the Cove was one of the smaller side caverns that was used esplicitly for agriculture. Shipwreck Cove could withstand years upon decades of a blockade only on the supplies they always had in storage units, but it could probably last two centuries on the amount of food they produce. With several drinking water sources and this strange soil in that one side cavern that just made crops *beg* to grow, the pirates could stay in there until Beckett's grandchildren had grandchildren. Well, that is, if anyone would want to have *his* children in the first place.

All in all, with the biggest docks in the world and all of the attributes named above, you can just *guess* how difficult the Pirate Lords will be to get off of their fat asses and chase away the Royal Navy once and for all.

Jack could already hear the squabbling and felt a migraine coming on.

## Chapter 24

That migraine Jack had wanted to complain about? Forget that! He didn't think that the Brethren Court could unnerve or annoy him nearly as much as the staring guards and he could just *see* them opening their mouths to greet him. The glare he sent them shut up most of the the Keeper's men from outright saying anything to him, but that didn't mean they weren't whispering amongst themselves. They had been at it as soon as the supposedly destroyed Black Pearl docked in Jack's - for his older self -usual place and it had become almost an uproar when they had seen her supposedly dead Captain at her helm. They had been staring at him ever since, as though fearing he might just be an apparition and that he might disappear at any moment now.

What was even worse, his crew were starting to notice it. Barbossa, at least, was convinced that it was either because he'd fucked up some rule of the Code or because he had been reported dead but was obviously alive. Some of the crew had decided it was probably because he was twenty years younger and they were unnerved by his sudden youth. They didn't quite realize they had it two out of three dead center.

He was grateful they were a little too distracted with the scenery that they didn't see the guards placing to fingers on the side of their foreheads and saluting at him with a small nod as he passed, practically a bow to a prince as far as free men went. Them noticing the gaping was bad enough. He wondered briefly if they had already sent someone to run off and inform the Keeper of this turn of events and how much longer he had before he had to confront the one sure indicator of just how much time had passed. The man had been relatively youthful the last time Jack had seen him. He wasn't like Gibbs, who had only changed in number of gray hairs and the attire he wore or the now constant presence of a rum flask on his person. He wasn't like Tia Dalma, but she was a bit more otherworldly than his companions realized. He was an ordinary man - if that could ever be said about him in the normal context - and he aged with time. Like nothing else, he would be Jack's time telling device and Jack was suitably nervous about it.

The doors to the council chambers where the Brethren Court was to meet were suitably big and lavish to indicate they opened to a world only the Pirate Lords and their own crew ever had the honor to see. They were made of thick, dark brown wooden beams connected and kept together by iron bars and chains. What was binding it all was some special type of wood sap from Africa that could hold together two ships if applied right, starboard to larboard, just by the railings. In the wood, beneath the chains and bars, were engravings of native peoples, chants and spells to practically soundproof the room within so no spies could listen in on the important things the Brethren Court discussed ... Or simply spare the rest of the Cove from their endless bickering. Four guards stood before the doors, all four with the expected crossed swords symbol and all equally dumbfounded when their eyes beheld Jack. They snapped to attention and saluted him like everyone else had before opening the doors, their muscles straining as much as the pulled chains were.

Behind the door was a long, well lit hallway and beyond it Jack could already hear the bickering of the Brethren Court. "Sounds like we've arrived last." He mused to his companions and set a brisk, sure pace towards the noise. "Then again, I *did* see seven other ships beside the Misty Lady. The Keeper and his men seem to have their hands full."

"Is it always like this?" Elizabeth asked as she came to Jack's left, his right quickly relinquished by James for Theodor since his Lieutenant was an eager puppy whenever pirates were concerned. He, on the other hand, was more interested in the sway of Jack's hips and the ease with which Jack's shoulders held himself in this dangerous place. The thirty eight year old Jack Sparrow had refused

to go anywhere near this place and yet this teenager seemed so at home. James wondered if he had done something stupid and had simply never returned here again for fear of the consequences. It wouldn't be such an impossible scenario.

"What? Tightly secured, overcrowded or *loud*?" Jack winced at the last one when a scream pierced the air shrilly, no doubt a hit to a *very* painful place or a wimp meeting his end.

"All three?" The woman more asked than answered, looking worriedly up ahead and wondering just what sort of chaos they were heading into.

"Always tight secured but never this crowded or loud. God knows the Keeper would go mad if he had to deal with them every single day for the rest of his life. I know I would. But don't you worry, Lizzie. As soon as all Pirate Lords are in, the meeting will start and they'll have to quiet down. At least for a little while."

"Do you know all the Pirate Lords?" Theodor asked as soon as the last words were out of Jack's mouth. Sparrow gave him an amused smile while he replied.

"I don't know the current ones, since I don't know if anyone had changed. But I *did* used to know the last Brethren Court. I even sailed with every one of them for a few weeks as a kid. Da wanted me to learn sailing tricks from all over the world and that Brethren Court had been halfway civil with each other." He winced at the sound of a bottle breaking against something, a man's skull, judging by the thud that followed. "I could easily jump from ship to ship without worrying about anyone getting wise ideas of throwing me overboard, marooning me or trying to use me against Da."

"Not many have changed, from what I know." Hector grumbled, hand on his pistol as they approached the end of the tunnel. The entire group was tense, already readying themselves for what was to come as Jack finally stepped into a big, well lit room from where all that noise was coming from. It was indeed a gigantic room, stretching through almost two thirds of the entire structure, with a big, long table in the middle, where the Pirate Lords sat, their men flanking them. There was a big chandelier hanging from the ceiling and plenty of other lanterns all over the place and there were plenty of balconies to allow admittance to more people and they were all shouting or fighting with each other. Elizabeth was barely pulled out of the way in time by Pintel and Ragetti when a man almost fell on her from where he was thrown off of one of the said balconies. There were gun shots and clashes of cutlasses and even the sound of smaller, hand-held cannons firing all over the place. Will stared wide eyed as a corpse was thrown their way, obviously done in by someone from Singapore, if the spike going through his head from chin to temple was anything to go by. Tia Dalma had already clobbered some man over the head with Groves' pistol while said man along with Gillette was standing back to back with Norrington, weapons drawn and eyes weary as they watched them all.

Jack sauntered in with no weapon in hand but the cutlass he stabbed into the big globe at the head of the table, his sword easily falling into its place as he claimed his spot as the Pirate Lord of the Caribbean.

The action did not go unnoticed by the other Pirate Lords, especially not Sao Feng, and as one they turned to see who had joined them, only for half of them to go wide eyed and open mouthed with shock while others went pale and looked on in fear, as though they had seen a ghost. Sparrow in turn eyed them all, taking stock of who he recognized and who was new. There was only two new faces among the Pirate Lords he knew and he frowned at them in thought. The rest were the same. There was Mistress Ching, the blind Chinese woman who was the Pirate Lord of the Pacific Ocean, her unseeing eyes going wide as one of her men told her just *who* and *what* had caused all



the commotion. He was pretty sure she had turned pale under all that white make-up. Then there was Jacord, the African man who had power over the Atlantic, who was also a few shades paler than his dark skin should be, although he seemed relieved to see Jack. Seems his relationship with Jack's family remained tight and sure. Eduardo Villanueva, who was never particularly fond of Jack, was staring wide eyed at Jack's new youth, the Pirate Lord of the Adriatic Sea undoubtedly jealous at whatever had rejuvenated Sparrow. Chevalle who had been fond of Jack when he was six and had been particularly sad to see Jack sail away from his Meditearian Sea, also looked almost weak with relief and happiness that his young friend was alright, but he looked expectedly stupefied by his appearance. Ammand, on the other hand, was half bitter, half shocked to see him and Jack wondered when he had made a long enough trip to the Black Sea to piss him off. Sumbhajee looked as indifferent of Jack himself but was intrigued by his apparent life and youth. Sparrow wondered if he was ready to start one of Gibbs anti-jinx dances, and if not him, one of his associates surely will do it for the chubby man.

Barbossa seemed to have been telling the truth about being the Pirate Lord of the Caspian Sea, for Jack could not see Boris Palachnik anywhere, not that he had ever felt particularly fond of the man. His Da, hadn't, either, and had sent one of his men with a five year old Jack with the excuse his son was troublesome for such a young age and needed looking after. Jack was sure that the old man would have killed him at the first given opportunity had he stayed longer than a week. Thankfully, Chevalle had been eager to accept him on board for almost an entire year, taking on most of the time he would have spent with Palachnik as well.

The teen briefly wondered if any of these people, besides Ching and Jacord, actually ever learned of his heritage in the years he no longer remembered.

"*You!*" The one man Jack did not recognize at all snarled in his face, startling him by grabbing him by his dreadlocks and pulling until he cried out so they were face to face. He was a bald, scarred Chinese man, from Singapore if his Piece of Eight was anything to go by, glaring at Jack fiercely, the men he had left behind on that island leering at him over the Pirate Lord's shoulder. A spike was shoved under Jack's jaw, as though in preparation to do upon him the punishment of failure or betrayal among the South China Sea pirates, the man's dark eyes flashing. "I will make you pay for all the humiliation you have bestowed upon me, Jack Sparrow!"

"Sao Feng, ya fool!" Jacord thundered from somewhere around the middle of the long table, jumping to his feet as his men trained their weapons on the Singapore pirates, who half did the same in return, the other half pointing their either at Jack or his crew behind him. "You will bring death to us all!"

"Let young Sparrow go now, Sao Feng." Mistress Ching ordered authoritatively, but the man, Sao Feng, didn't budge.

"Today is the day you meet your maker, Jack Sparrow."

Jack, strangely, didn't look scared at all. Besides the initial shock, he lacked any surprise or fear for his life. If anything, he looked pityingly at the man threatening him.

"Sorry, mate, but if you continue on like this, it will be *you* meeting my maker and then your own. Better just put the spike down, aye?"

But Feng didn't budge. "Your words will not weaver my resolve, Sparrow. This is your en-aaaaah!" Sao screamed as an arrow pierced the hand holding the spike, lodging deep into the wood after it passed cleanly through his hand, skin, flesh and bone as though it were nothing but air. He jerked away for Jack in pain while a few of his men were shot dead right behind him. Frederico snatched Jack back away from him even as James and Will came to stand in front of the teen, Elizabeth

keeping his back. Not that it was needed, as ten of the Keeper's men came and pointed various weaponry at the Singapore men, dozens more keeping them on target from further away. Jack didn't even need to look up to know where the snipers and archers were, having at one point been the one to suggest certain crooks and crannies and balconies for them to the Keeper himself, since he had been trained by his mother's tribe and understood quite a bit about it all.

He watched as the Keeper's men viciously subdued any who dared oppose them, a big, burly, slightly older man with a graying ginger beard and curly short hair, tanned skin and dark eyes bringing Sao Feng to the ground while cursing him in Gaelic. Jack winced at some of the things that reached his ears as a twenty years older than he was used to Victor nearly crushed the Singapore Pirate Lord's head under his boot.

"Tried to warn you, mate. Just be glad they decided to take care of things on their own without summoning the Keeper of the Code to interfere." Sparrow told him half apologetically before nodding to the two men that came to stand as his two shadows. "Ivan. Ian. You look ... "

"Young Master Jack," the blond, blue eyed Russian twins greeted together, eying him up, either for injury or trying to figure out the source of his youth. "You look even *younger*."

"Yes, well," Jack shrugged, perfectly acutely aware that everyone was keenly watching and listening to him. Evidently, they had all heard about his death and wanted to know the truth of the matter. "I apparently was swallowed by the Kraken, dragged to Davy Jones' Locker, was trapped there for a year and this lot here," he pointed to the core crew of the Black Pearl casually, doing his best not to reveal how fond and thankful he was to have them at his side. It wouldn't do to have any potential enemies he might have made in the years he didn't remember to go after them for some, to him, inconceivable reason. "Then came and busted me out, but my stay there apparently had some very bad effects on me so Tia Dalma, my dearest voodoo knowing friend, did this," he indicated at himself with a sweeping hand. "To me in order to preserve both my mind and my body. So now here we are, waiting for the spell to wear off and hoping I had enough time to heal."

He swept his gaze around the room, stepping further into the chamber, going for Mistress Ching and Jacord first. The old lady greeted him surprisingly - to the others who knew her as extremely temperamental and prone to yelling - warmly, running her hands over his face and marveling at his youth. He wondered briefly when he saw her last before he was sent to the Locker. She had called him her guest protégé, her *best* protégé out of all who she had mentored and had been somewhat sad when he had left. She used to say that, in his presence, she swore she could see sunlight reflecting off of the sea again. And he had loved all of her stories as a boy. He didn't like her brutality, though. She did her best not to let him see that side of her and her men. He still saw it and that was how, by twelve, he hated piracy until he saw that none-pirates could be just as cruel.

Jacord hugged him warmly, talking with him in one of the 'wilder' African dialects that Jack had learned from him. He had used to carry Jack on his shoulders as they walked through port towns, telling him local stories and legends of Africa. Sparrow always liked being around Jacord. It made him feel closer to his own Mum, whom he had no memories of but knew to be of both Haiti and New World native origins.

The next he greeted was Capitaine Chevalle, the penniless Frenchman, whom he had already stated was very fond of Jack. He was the first to teach Jack French, Latin, Spanish and Italian and even some Greek, which he later perfected on his own. With his knowledge of these languages, Jack could later learn Portageese and all the weirder dialects that have developed in the colonies, which had in turn saved him quite a few times, as far as he could remember. Not to mention that it had impressed Armando, Jack thought with a barely suppressed blush. He thanked his lucky stars that his skin was darker or else it would have been obvious.

He only nodded to the other Pirate Lords, keeping clear of the now released but still held at gun, sword and arrow point Sao Feng and his men, returning to where his crew was standing by Barbossa and the big globe of the world. He gave James a wink and his friends a reassuring smile before gesturing for Barbossa to get the meeting underway.

"As he who issued summons, I convene this, the Fourth Brethren Court." He said with all grandeur of someone calling a king's court and Jack repressed a snort. True enough, maybe Barbossa wasn't even aware of how accurate that description may be but Jack wasn't about to enlighten him. He was a little too busy watching out for a certain Keeper of the Code so he almost missed the Caspian Sea's Pirate Lord's next words. "To confirm your lordship and right to be heard, present now your pieces of eight, my fellow cap'ns."

"Oh bloody hell, they know nothing about all of this." He muttered to himself as he watched each of the Pirate Lords warily or uncaringly hand over their Piece of Eight. Barbossa even openly showed that he had let an idiot carry his for him for the past decade or so and Jack wondered if it would be too bad a reaction if he called them all out on their rather limited knowledge on the Code. He ignored Gibbs' and Pintel's grumbling conversation about the nature of the Nine Pieces of Eights as he met gazes with Tia Dalma, who seemed to be eagerly watching the items be placed in a bowl held by Ragetti. She smiled charmingly at him but it came out too sharp for his liking and for the first time he questioned his motives for de-aging him to back when he'd just become a Pirate Lord.

"Sparrow," Hector called when he realized that only eight out of nine were there and turned to the only possible culprit. Deciding this was possibly his only chance to test his new suspicions, Jack resorted to what he did best.

"According to the Pirata Codex, more commonly known as the Pirate Code, or simply the Code, once all Pirate Lords are convened inside Shipwreck Cove and this very meeting room, according to page 13, section 7, subsection 3l, sheet 52, paragraph 8, row 2, all Pirate Lords must present their Piece of Eight so it is visible." He smiled at the stunned faces of most of the room's occupants, knowing that this very well might bring out a more violent reaction than whatever Barbossa was planning with Calypso. "In other words, since I keep my Piece of Eight in plain sight, for all to see whether they know what they are looking at or not, I am playing by the rules and you cannot make me hand over the very symbol of my lordship over the Caribbean."

There was a long moment of flabbergasted silence as the Pirate Lords all absorbed this, wondering if what he was saying was true or not. Finally, Sao Feng, always eager to make things difficult for Jack, slammed his fist on the table. "You made that up!"

The Keeper's men were already cocking their guns and preparing their arrows in warning and Jack wondered why he felt no pity for this man he had never met before, to his knowledge at least. "Wanna check it with the Keeper?" There was a collective wince among the older Pirate Lords and any pirate present, even Barbossa and his little monkey. Sparrow gave them a perhaps too sharp smile. "Thought so. Can we carry on?"

Despite feeling like he had been outright dismissed and vowing to himself that he will find Sparrow's Piece of Eight before Tia Dalma - who seemed somewhere between angry, impressed, betrayed and proud at the moment - decides to return him to the dead, Barbossa straightened his back and addressed the room as a whole once again.

Jack tuned him out as he absently reached for his Compass, straining to hear his Pearl's explanation about Sao Feng when he noticed something ... strange. The item under his fingers gave a violent tremor when he touched it, as if elated he had noticed it and he frowned in confusion. Without

much thought and no hesitation at all, Jack half registered that his beloved ship had stopped talking with peaked curiosity at his confusion and waited for a reaction out of him as he opened the Compass.

At first, nothing seemed out of the ordinary. It seemed to be working as it always was, pointing in the direction of what Jack wanted most at the moment. But then he realized something was off. Besides teaching him Haitian and other tribal languages, Jacord had also taught Jack how to never feel lost in space without the use of any usual indicators as to where which point of the world was. Such skills were later perfected throughout his years of sailing and being taught to memorize the entire map, as detailed as they are before he even met Fitzwilliam and the rest of the Barnacle's little crew. So he knew, without a doubt, where the one place that haunted his sleep at night was even when he woke up after the most disorienting nightmares. And that was not the direction of it, the one his Compass was showing. It was too much to the West.

Jack looked in the direction his Compass was showing and blushed when he thought, perhaps, it was working just fine but that Jack's initial desire to return to the Devil's Triangle had been replaced from his top priority list a little lower by his new lover, who was standing right there. James arched an eyebrow at him, finding his staring strange, since he couldn't see the Compass or understand what was puzzling Jack so. But when Jack looked back down to the Compass, he was surprised to see that the needle was trembling before it moved a little bit more West-South-West.

*'What the?'* He frowned, thinking hard and watching the needle of his most treasured possession besides the Wicked Wench/Black Pearl trembling until he realized it wasn't exactly trembling, but *moving*! Moving with what it was pointing at. Moving with ... "Oh bugger."

## Chapter 25

### Chapter Notes

Merry Christmas!

"Oh bugger."

No sooner than had those words left his lips did the all too familiar - to him - alarm bell started ringing, shaking the entire Cove with its too loud sound. The pirates all looked up in panic, the Keeper's men grimly tightening their hold on their weapons and Ivan and Ian stepping closer to Jack as all the Pirate Lords reached for their weapons. Said pirate found himself sandwiched between Will at his front and Elizabeth at his back, Frederico and James flanking him like shields as more yelling started around the room.

"Our location has been betrayed!" Sao Feng called out to his fellow Pirate Lords, halting further arguments with his loud and authoritative voice. "Davy Jones is under the Command of Lord Cutler Beckett. They're on their way here."

"Who is this betrayer?" Jacord demanded angrily, slamming his mace of African dark wood against the big table threateningly, murmurs rising around the meeting chambers.

"Who else, but the most silver-tongued of them all?" The Singapore Pirate Lord turned his gaze to Jack, who was as pale as a sheet. He wasn't even paying attention to what was going on around him, just looking at the moving needle of his faithful Compass and trying to comprehend what it was showing him.

Elizabeth jumped in to defend him since he didn't seem keen on doing it on his own. "That's preposterous!" She exclaimed, cocking a gun at one of Tai Huang's men that came too close, thinking he had went unnoticed. "Jack has been in Davy Jones Locker for the past year, since his death, and he's been with us day and night ever since!"

"We all know how very ... resourceful Jack Sparrow can be." Sao Feng sneered, leering at the youthful Caribbean Pirate Lord, who was still not paying them any heed or attention. "I am sure that, to save his own hide, he would gladly sell our necks to the enemy."

"Not to the likes of Beckett!" Both Swann and Turner protested and even Barbossa nodded in agreement. He had met Sparrow after the man's dealings with Beckett and he knew part of the general story of what went down. If there was ever a man Sparrow, who never really held a grudge and forgave all too easily, hated, than it was that midget Lord, Cutler Beckett.

"Besides, Capt'n be too young to even know of Beckett!" Gibbs threw in, being perhaps the only one other than Tia Dalma that knew the exact moment Jack had turned to piracy for good. "He has no memories past his eighteenth summer and that be a long year before he met Beckett!"

"And it was him who told you his age, was it?" The Chinese man persisted, glaring over Will's shoulder at the still dazed Sparrow.

"Witty Jack did not even know wot be happenin' when 'e woke up." The voodoo witch spoke up,

glaring death at Sao Feng. "Him be no traitor. Not when Beckett be de one ta take somethin' most precious from 'im."

That had the desired effect and Jack's head snapped up while the Pearl's voice hissed in his ear. The Compass was momentarily forgotten, as was the impossibility heading their way, in light of the one thing no one had been able or willing to tell him since he woke up and saw his ship was now entirely black because it was covered in soot. His eyes went straight to Feng as the man continued trying to make his case to the Brethren Court, who looked unsure as to what to think or do. For they knew of Jack's exploits against the EITC's best interests and they knew his motto was freedom. It seemed almost impossible it could be him, but they had seen stranger things happen in their lives.

"And how do you know he was not faking it, his lack of memory? Hm?" The man approached the group, not at all fearing the guns and swords pointed at him, nor the archers and snipers still hidden somewhere just out of sight on the balconies overhead. He met Will's glare with a smirk of his own before his eyes slid to Jack. "If you know the Code so well, then I do believe you know what is done to traitors."

Jack met his gaze unflinchingly, black eyes hard as onyxes. "And what makes you so certain that I am the betrayer? Have you any proof to present to the Brethren Court besides sending men to infiltrate my crew, mutiny and take over my ship before handing us all over to your waiting hands?" Cries of outrage came from the Keeper's men upon hearing this and Jacord and Mistress Ching looked neigh uncomfortable at this turn of events, as well as very, *very* angry. Jack's smile was razor sharp. "How did you like the company of Captain Finch and his Code-breaking crew of miscreants? Tried to rob you as well?" He boldly pushed William out of the way and came to stand chest to chest with the older man, ignoring his crew's and friends' protests. "If you're going to betray the Brethren Court, mate, do be less obvious about it that even the Spanish catch on."

"So you are playing for two sides, Sparrow." Sao Feng tried to redirect the growing ire of the Brethren Court from himself to Jack. Unsuccessful, it was. Piteous, really.

"Far from it being playing for two sides if information is given freely by a good friend." Jack took out his pistol and pointed it at Feng's face before the other man could blink. "All the conformation I needed was from a few more aquatic friends of mine. You really should keep a weather eye on the horizon, mate. You never know who might be listening and the sirens do have big ears."

Sao lunged for him but Victor, appearing out of seemingly nowhere, ran him through the shoulder before he could reach the youngest Pirate Lord and Feng went down with a cry of pain.

Jack looked down at him dispassionately. "And I do know the punishment for betrayal. Pray to all gods that will listen that it be me who punishes you and not the Keeper. You won't like him when he's angry." He walked past the downed figure of the Singapore leader and instead faced the enraged Brethren Court. "I fear he might be right as to our locations having been found, ladies and gentleman. But it matters not how they found us. The question is," He paused, meeting each of their eyes in turn to express how grave the situation was. Oh, they had no idea. "What will we do now that they have?"

Murmurs broke out in the room before Elizabeth, brazen youth that she is, boldly spoke up, seeing that no one seemed to have any idea as to what they should do. "We fight!" She was nearly laughed out of the room.

Mistress Ching at least took pity on her fellow she-pirate to explain, although her voice was somehow half mocking, half patronizing as she said it. "Shipwreck Cove is a fortress. A well-supplied fortress. There is no need to fight if they cannot get to us." Which was, of course, more

than true. Shipwreck Cove was used as the center of all 'political order' among pirates for this very reason. If there was ever a safe port for all pirates, no matter what was going on, it was Shipwreck Island, its Cove and the Tow within it.

Babrossa discarded her suggestion and gave his own. "There be a third course." That got their attention and Hector used it to the best of his abilities, making quite a thetric scene of it all. He had learned from the best, after all, after being around Jack Sparrow for how long he had. "In another age, at this very spot, the First Brethren Court captured the sea goddess and bound her in her bones." The Brethren Court nodded along, knowing the story well, interested to see where he was going. Babrossa nodded with them before almost sneering at them in half pity, as though he saw them as idiots. "That was a mistake." At the shocked and indignant faces they were making, he hurried on before they could interrupt him. "Oh, we tamed the seas for ourselves, aye. But opened the door to Beckett and his ilk!"

No one could argue his point and so they stayed quiet. Jack wanted to applaud him, only he knew this won't lead them anywhere but towards more bickering. The matter of Calypso was closed ages ago. Although they might change their minds if they knew what Jack now knew. He was just waiting for the messenger to come and confirm what his Compass was telling him. They were near. Jack could feel it and excitement and dread both coursed through him. He could not decide which was winning.

"Better were the days when mastery of seas came not from bargains struck with eldritch creatures, but from the sweat of a man's brow and the strength of his back alone. You all know this to be true. Gentlemen. Ladies." He nodded to the few female pirates present as he placed his hands, clasped, in front of himself, feigning calm and confidence in the face of the possible bad reaction his words might result in. "We must free Calypso."

There was an immediate uproar when what he said registered, all the Pirate Lords calling that he was mad, for his death or tongue cutting or tongue cutting *and* his death. Barbossa, for all that he had braced himself, still seemed surprised that it was *that* bad of a reaction and started looking a bit worried.

"I agree with Barbossa!" For all that Sao Feng was technically a traitor and should have been killed by now, he was still one of the current Pirate Lords and he was, at least at the moment, needed, so he had been let up by the overzealous to kill him Victor sometime during Barbossa's speech with a prompting from Jack's glare. It wouldn't do for the Keeper's own men to be breaking one of the most 'sacred' laws of the Code regarding the Brethren. He was still held at arrow point by the archers, as were all of his men, so it was okay for the ground pirates to let him be. For now.

"Calypso was our enemy then, she will be our enemy now." Jacord argued reasonably.

"It's unlikely her mood's improved." Chevalle agreed with a nod, grumbling about women under his breath in French. Jack hoped Tia Dalma didn't hear him.

"I would still agree with Sao Feng. We release Calypso." Eduardo Villanueva said, slamming a pistol down on the table, looking up at the tall Frenchman from his low statured point of view with a fierce glare.

"You threaten me?" Said French Pirate Lord sounded both incredulous and enraged at the audacity of the shorter man.

"I silence you!" When the Pirate Lords started clobbering each other again, Jack got sick of it but stopped from doing anything as a messenger ran in to the room, nearly bumping into him when he saw Jack's youthful appearance, mouth going agape.

"M-master Jack?"

"What have you to report, lad?" Jack ignored that the 'lad' was at least seventeen years his senior and instead arched his eyebrow to get him talking. It worked, of course, and the man actually saluted him like a proper Navy man, giving a report to his superior officer. Jack wondered where they got this one.

"An armada heading our way, sir, led by two extremely fast ships hauling a big one behind them, sir." The man immediately said, not caring about the chaos going on around them. "The Watch has counted over a hundred and fifty ships all together and they have identified the Flying Dutchman, sir, and the Endeavor, sir." He avoided a man flung their way with practiced ease, Jack's own self moved out of the way by the Russian twins that served as his shadows. "The other ship hauling the Endeavor, sir, well ... You're not going to believe this, sir."

"And as I am now is anymore believable than whatever the Watch saw, how, exactly?" Sparrow asked with wry humor that at least made the man relax a little.

"I see your point." He nodded before steeling himself for the news he was about to share. "The Watch said the other ship was actually a *shipwreck*, manned by ghosts. And their sails, tattered as they were, were said to be depicting a bird, Mater Jack, sir."

"An eagle, no doubt." The Captain of the previously Wicked Wench now the Black Pearl didn't need to hear any more. The messenger blinked at him in astonishment.

"Yes, how did you know?"

"Because that, mate, is none other than the Silent Mary." It took a moment for Jack's words to register before the messenger went white as a sheet. He looked ready to star shaking or go through a mental breakdown due to fear. Jack couldn't let that happen so he grabbed the man's shoulders and looked at him gravely. "Tell the gunning crew that defenses are to be on alert. Inform everyone. Keep quiet about the Mary to anyone not on the immediate need to know list. I'll deal with this lot, here." When the man scurried away to do as he was told, Jack pulled out his Compass again. They were close.

"This is madness," he heard Elizabeth say and he couldn't help himself.

"This is politics, Lizzie. Pure politics."

She paid him little heed. "Meanwhile, our enemies are bearing down upon us." The woman said grimly as she and Will pushed away a burly Italian man that made as if to stab them, Frederico finishing him off before he could attack anyone else.

"If they not be here already." Barbossa said pessimistically. He then jumped up onto the table a shot his gun once, twice in order to get the Brethren Court's attention, glaring at them all and looking rather silly on the table. Jack frowned at the marks his dirty boots left on the wood. "It was the First Court what imprisoned Calypso. We should be the ones to set her free. And in her gratitude, she will see fit to grant us boons." He sounded persuasive but Jack pipped up from where he was still glaring at the boots on hte table.

"Whose boons? Your boons?" He looked up at the glaring Caspian Sea Pirate Lord, grinning innocently. "Utterly deceptive twaddle-speak, says I."

Barbossa kept glaring at him as he stepped down. "If you have a better alternative, please, share."

Jack opened his mouth but then closed it, as his Pearl giggled words into his ear, something that



she insisted his older self would say. As he thought it over, a smile had to tug at his lips lest it turn into a smug smirk. Maybe he hadn't changed that much in the past twenty years, if only he started hiding his true self. "Cuttlefish." He resisted the urge to grin with childish glee at the utterly stunned looks on the faces of his fellow Pirate Lords and every other man and woman in the room. "Aye. Let us not, dear friends," he said as he started walking around the room, through the crowds of pirates, towards the other end of the table, unoccupied by anyone else. "Forget our dear friends, the cuttlefish. Flipping glorious little sausages. Pen them up together, they'll devour each other without a second thought. Human nature, isn't it? Or... Or fish nature." He leaned into a China man's face who was looking at him with that particular look in his eyes that Jack knew he could take advantage of. He easily bypassed the man and came to stand behind Mistress Ching, placing his hands on her tense shoulders, giving her a little massage so she wouldn't protest while her men went for their swords. Not that it would help. An arrow was faster than a sword can ever be and Shipwreck Cove's archers were some of the best in the world. "So, yes, we could hole up here well-provisioned and well-armed. Half of us would be dead within the month. Either because we cannot get along or because the Keeper will get fed up with us all invading his home 24/7. Which seems quite grim to me, any way you slice it. Or..." He made to go through a crowd of African pirates, but they glared at him. Jacord was nice enough to push his chair in a little more so he can walk around them, past the Pirate Lord of the Atlantic and towards Eduardo and his men. "As my learned colleague so naively suggests, we can release Calypso, and we can pray that she will be merciful." He leaned in to Eduardo and one of his shorter, chubby pirates. "I rather doubt it."

He leaned up and continued on through the pirates as he made his case, aware that some of the Frenchmen were glaring daggers at Villanueva and his men who had guns trained on his back. He paid it no mind. "Can we pretend she's anything other than a woman scorned like which fury hell hath no?" He answered his own question before either Sao Feng, Barbossa or Villanueva could say something stupid and utterly suicidal at this point. Jack knew how to work a crowd, how to manipulate people. He had the audience. He held court here, thank you very much. "We cannot. *Res ipsa loquitur, tabula in naufragio.*" He finally turned to face the room at large, enjoying the smug satisfaction on Chivalle's face and the utter flabbergasted expressions on everyone else's but Frederico's, Tia Dalma's and those who work in the Cove. "We are left with but one option."

"And what be that, Sparrow?" Sao Feng sneered from his place at the other end of the table, sharing it now with a wary Barbossa.

"I fully agree with Miss Elizabeth Swann. We must fight." He could see the protests rising and pitched his voice lower, losing all good humor and turning as serious as death itself. "If we wish to survive." Elizabeth, who had been beaming that he had taken her side, felt her smile slip as she registered his grave tone of voice.

"You've always ran from a fight!" Barbossa protested, trying to shake Jack's argument. Sparrow looked at him as though he had grown a second head.

"Right. Tell that to the crew of the Silent Mary. They're waiting outside-" Jack clamped his mouth shut and put both hands over it for good measure, for he had not planned to let that slip. "Uh, can we pretend I never said that?" Utter panic broke loose, people screaming, pirates jumping off of balconies, running towards the closed council chamber doors where the guards were still keeping them closed until the meeting was dismissed. "Guess not." He grumbled to himself before putting two fingers between his lips and giving out a loud, sharp whistle that made them all flinch.

Barbossa, was predictably, trying to use this new situation to his advantage but Jack wasn't going to have any of that. Of course, Barbossa seemed ready to fight fire with fire and called upon the one thing he had learned Jack will never go against, for whatever strange, inconceivable reason. "As per the Code, an act of war, and this be exactly that, can only be declared by the Pirate King."

Jack went as stiff as a board, glaring at the older captain of the Black Pearl. Gillete looked aghast. "You just made that up."

"Fraid not, Philip." Sparrow's reply went unheard due to Barbossa's louder one.

"Did I, now?" Jack braced himself, knowing what will follow. "I call on Cap'n Teague, Keeper of the Code." A heavy silence fell across the room at those words and Jack tried not to show any outwardly reactions. Well, this was going to be interesting. And tense. And awkward. May he fellow heathen gods help Tia Dalma, for Calypso or not, she had not yet faced a force of nature that was an overprotective Captain Edward Teague.

One of Sri Sumbhaje's, foolishly bravely and blindly loyally spoke then in the stead of his Captain. "Sri Sumbhaje proclaims this all to be *folly!* *Hang* the code. Who cares a-" He was cut out by a sharp, deafeningly loud shot of the pistol before he fell to the floor, dead, shot through the heart. The petrified pirates all looked towards the staircase behind Jack that he knew was there and led to a private office of the Keeper where he reviewed any and all reports of breaking the code from all around the world and dispatched his men to go and take care of it accordingly. He had climbed those very same stairs countless times in his childhood and briefly wondered when he had ascended them the last time before his death by Kraken.

An old pirate in an elaborate, red, leather coat and a big, captain's hat with a feather climbed down the stairs slowly, his gun still smoking. He had tanned, age wrinkled skin with a scar or two on his cheeks, a beard very similar to Jack's with fuller mustache, his hair, slowly graying, also fashioned in dreadlocks and decorated with trinkets, most of them crosses and simple, white beads. His steps were confident and precise, still holding some swagger of his younger days, back proud and unbent by time. Had he not been dressed in worn and slightly dirtied clothes, he might have been mistaken for royalty.

"The Code is the law." He said as he blew at his gun before replacing it at his belt. He came up behind Jack and gestured at his men to bring forth a gigantic tome before, for the first time, acknowledging Jack's presence there. "You're in my way, boy."

A sharp pain pierced through Jack's heart. He did as he was told, ducking his head a little so the Keeper won't notice his youthful face. So they had had a falling out over the years, it would seem. Teague's voice had never been like that with Jack, even when they were trying to hide any association between them from the rest of the world. Brisk and cold was not a treatment Jack was used from the old Pirate Lord of Madagascar.

The Pearl was whispering soothingly in his ear as the Code was placed upon the table, heavy and well locked with only good ol' Doggy coming up to him with the keys. He watched as Teague made a show of searching for the right sentence when Jack knew he had the entire book as well memorized as Jack did. "Ah. Babrossa is right," he said, tapping a certain line on the big page.

Sick of being ignored, Jack frowned and stepped forward, shocking those who didn't know his relationship with the Keeper at his audacity. "Wait a minute." He made to also pretend to be reading the book when the older man whirled around at the sound of his voice, his face shocked, the impassive mask gone.

Two pairs of equally black eyes met for the first time in many years (not that the eighteen year old Jack knew that).

"Jackie?"

## Chapter 26

"Jackie?" Captain Edward Teague, Pirate Lord of the Madagascar, Keeper of the Pirate Code, he who had seen and done it all - if rumors are to be believed - couldn't help but stare at the rejuvenated Jack Sparrow of only eighteen years of age as opposed to the thirty eight he had been expecting to find him in after he had realized the Song had been sung. It had been years since they had seen each other, after Jack had set free one certain friend of his who had been sentenced to death for breaking the Code by attacking another pirate ship. All Teague knew about Sparrow were the stories that circulated the world as Jack made a name for himself, but he had did his best to keep tabs on the wayward boy with the first eleven rules of the Code tattooed on his back as a representation of his station within the Shipwreck Cove and all of piracy at large.

Said boy-who-should-be-a-man-but-was-a-boy-again turned to fully face the Keeper, boldly keeping their gazes locked like rare few dared with Teague. He saluted the older pirate with the same salute everyone had been greeting him with since he had set foot on the docks of the Town of Shipwreck, two fingers touching the side of his forehead with a small nod. "Keeper, sir."

He was as shocked as everyone else when the aging man grabbed him by the shoulders and dragged him into his still strong arms, wrapping him up in an emotional hug. Jack could actually feel a slight tremor coming from him and a small smile spread across his lips. So maybe they hadn't really grown apart; the old man had probably just been pissed with him for dying. Jack wouldn't be surprised if that was the case. But it was obvious he had been missed and so he melted into the embrace, hugging him back and enjoying finally feeling at home and so completely safe that he even forgot a little about the dangers nearing the Island.

Teague ignored the gaping pirates as he drew back a little from the Caribbean Pirate Lord, taking his face into his hands, staring at the features of a boy for whose safety he had always fretted, day in and day out until he had made him the Pirate Lord that he was today after proving he was capable of looking out after himself and countless others. It had been painful to see that haunted look in those usually bright and warm dark eyes after the Battle of the Devil's Triangle, but he had been glad at the outcome. So he had given his Piece of Eight to him and declared him a new Pirate Lord, the Caribbean's third one at that, since he knew these waters better than maybe even the aquatic creatures that lived here and loved them even more.

But that boy had been gone for twenty years. A legend had been born in his place. A legend larger than life, whose name everyone knew, one that never seemed to end or grow dull, no matter how many times it was retold. Yet before him stood not the legend, but the boy again and Teague didn't know what to do.

"How?" Was all he could ask, still staring at the teen's face. Jack gave a half bitter smile and a shrug.

"Beats me. I died, ended up in the Locker, stayed there for a year and became slightly too unstable for my own safety and sanity because of it. This was the only solution to preserve my mind and body. I kind of gave an expatiation just a short while ago, but you missed it."

"It's sound like quite the story. A story I'd like to know."

Sparrow snorted. "You and me both. I don't remember a good part of it, as it were. Needed time to heal, which is why I am like this." He glanced down at himself to make his point. "It's supposed to wear off on its own, if I understood correctly. I actually think it might be time, soon."

"And how did you escape the Locker?" Was what really interested Teague, not that he wasn't grateful. He was elated, almost on a high from seeing Jack was alive, safe and (mostly) well. "I thought that was impossible."

"You're forgetting that I'm Captain Jack Sparrow." The cheeky little reply along with the teasing smile wrought out a laugh from the Keeper and Jack's eyes twinkled before they softened, his grin now a gentle smile. "And it seems I made good friends this time. They fetched me and kept me safe at my most vulnerable."

Teague followed his gaze as it slid fondly to the core crew of the Black Pearl. Gibbs, Marty, Pintel, Ragetti, Mr Cotton and his parrot. Will Turner and Elizabeth Swann. The unexpected presence of Philip Gillete, Theodore Groves and, most importantly and most shocking of all, James Norrington. Oh, Teague knew them all. He had to, since their lives seemed to be oh so intertwined with Jack's. Then there were two he wasn't the most comfortable with, although he knew Tia Dalma was truly fond of Jack and saw him something like a son or a nephew. But she was still dangerous, though not nearly as much to Jack as she would be to anyone else. Teague outright glared at the should-be-dead-but-was-revived Hector Babrossa, who had once dared mutiny against and then maroon Jack. Had he not just redeemed himself by saving Jack, Teague would have hunted him down as soon as he heard he was alive and not cursed with immortality.

"Good friends, you say?" He had not missed the Spaniard in Jack's group and wondered at his masochist tendencies.

"The best. Some old and some new."

"While your lover's reunion is touched," Sao Feng cut into their private conversation with a mocking voice and a sneer on his face. "Do we not have more pressing matters to attend to than Captain Teague buggering his little whore?"

"EWW!" Jack all but screeched, tearing himself away from the now fuming, highly insulted Keeper as Teague glared death and snarled like a raging animal at the Pirate Lord of Singapore.

"That is my *son*, you sick, perverted moron!"

Sao Feng's jaw, along with the jaw of anyone else who had not been aware of this fact - and that only excluded Tia Dalma, Joshamee Gibbs, Mistress Ching, Jacord and those who worked in the Cove as the Keeper's men - hit the ground with an echoing thud. Jack was rubbing his eyes, as though that would banish the images brought on by Feng's words.

"I think imbecile's more like it, Da. Remember? Moron, imbecile and then idiot. Bloody buggering hell, I'll never get that out of my head. I'm cursed, traumatized. Tia Dalma's spell was wasted. Ew, ew, ew, ew."

"Idiot it is then." Teague said as he patted his son's shoulder comfortingly. He glared at the gawking pirates and their jaws snapped shut with a loud clack. He turned back to the truly traumatized looking teen. "You were saying?"

"Right. Pirate King. 'It shall be the duties, as the king, to declare war, parley with shared adversaries' etc etc etc." It seemed that focusing on the Code helped get him over the disturbing images Sao Feng had implanted into his mind with that stupid deduction. Said man was currently burning with shame and humiliation, his hatred for Sparrow growing by the minute. He'll have to be properly dealt with after this sorry mess was finished with.

"There has not been a king since the First Court." Chevalle said, looking around the room although

his gaze stayed strangely on Jack for a moment or two longer, contemplative. Thoughtful. *Considering*. Jack arched an eyebrow, although he went unseen by the Frenchman. "And that's not likely to change."

"Not likely." Teague agreed and finally left his son's side, going to sit in a chair in the back and picking up his guitar, idly playing some tune he knew by heart by now, his gaze subtly fixed in his de-aged son. That was quite possibly the most absurd thing to have happened in his life. And that was *saying* something.

"Why not?" It was, for the first time, Will who beat either Elizabeth or Theodore to the question, looking around in confusion.

Gibbs obliged him with a reply. "See, the pirate king is elected by popular vote."

"And each pirate only ever votes for himself." Babrossa finished it for him, bitter and not understanding why they were even considering this. They already had a means to be rid of all their enemies, including the infamous Silent Mary, no matter how she had found itself here when she should be at the bottom of the sea. Then again, seeing as to whom Beckett had under his command, it was to be expected that something as simple as ship resurrection was happening. "This be a waste of time. We should just free Calypso and be done with it. I'm sure she would help those who finally freed her."

"She's more likely to go after you lot first for imprisoning her in the first place, not help you." Jack secretly beamed at having James' support in this. At least his lover was sharp enough to understand the tragedy that could follow. Shipwreck Island was immune to even a goddess' magical influences, but in order to free Calypso, they'd have to be at open sea, out of the shallows. Where they were fair game and easy prey to an angry goddess.

"Not with 'er fondness fer certain idiotic pirates we all know." He sent a pointed look at Jack, who in turn looked at him as though he were crazy.

"Mate, I can't drown." He said as though that explained everything. It did, although no one seemed to get it.

Philip rolled his eyes at the pirates, muttering something about their simplemindedness and stupidity. "It means," he drawled, getting their attention. "That the goddess can attack us all and he will survive. While the rest of us die. Because we don't hold the favor of mermaids."

"That story is actually *true*!?" Someone cried out from the crowd of pirates incredulously and Jack sighed, pitying his own sanity. Tia Dalma was actually looking at him with pity even though he was against Barbossa's plan to free her. They were losing time. If their enemies arrive before Shipwreck Island before the Brethren and their ships can get out of the Crossing, they will be easy targets. There won't be going back because ships are not meant to go backwards.

"I call for a vote." He said, much to the groans and frustration of the other Pirate Lords, but he just kept his cheery little smile as they whined like spoiled children told to do their homework.

"Why should we vote?" Ammand grunted petulantly, challenging Jack.

"Have we not already decided that we will not fight?" Ching questioned as well and Sparrow rolled his eyes at them all. He was the youngest but apparently the most mature and normal of the lot. Which was saying something, as Jack knew he was by no definition of the word considered normal.

"Listen, mates. Out there, beyond the safety of the Cove, the Silent Mary and the Flying Dutchman are approaching with all those unpleasant Englishmen that want to hang us. Now *they*," He emphasized with his fluttering hands, becoming more animated with each word he spoke. "They will one day die or simply lose interest or maybe even find some way to make the Crossing without proper education in that regard. With *them* we can deal with." He stopped moving about and leaned heavily on the table, over the Code with his hands on either side of the big tome, letting his face become a bit shadowed as he tried to impress on them the gravity of the situation. "But Jones or Salazar ... Jones will eventually be called to sail elsewhere by this Beckett individual, but Salazar is like a dog with a bone. He won't be leaving this place, ever. And he has the whole of eternity to wait for us out there."

"What do you mean?" Sri Sumbhaje's remaining advocate asked for his master, said Pirate Lord frowning in confusion at the youngest one there.

"Captain Salazar, his men and his infamous galleon the Silent Mary fell in the Battle of the Devil's Triangle. How many of you know anything about that place or that particular battle, from twenty years go, it would seem?"

"It was a fierce battle, led by Captain Teague and ten other Captains. Only one ship came out of the skirmish in the end and it was the ship that defeated the Silent Mary." Villanueva summarized for the Court, eying Sparrow suspiciously. "The Wicked Wench was her name, I heard. Once upon a time captained by Captain Morgan. Good man. Died in that battle."

Tai Huang and his men, along with all those who had been there whenever Jack had addressed the Black Pearl by her first name, gaped at Jack as he grinned. "Aye, she be a fine ship. The fastest ship to sail the seas."

"Before the Black Pearl appeared." Sao Feng agreed, ignoring Tai Huang as he tried to get his attention.

"De Wicked Wench *is* de Black Pearl." Tia Dalma informed them all with a wicked smirk. "I brought back 'er Captain fer this meetin'." She cackled as more staring and gaping ensued. Jack just rubbed at his forehead and waited for the ball to drop. When he saw that it had, he put up a hand to stop any questions or exclamations from interrupting what he would rather discuss, glaring at them all to tell them to shut it without using words. It was quite effective.

"The Devil's Triangle is a cursed place. Any and all ships that ever sailed in never sailed out, that much I am sure all of you know." The pirates all nodded, listening. "I lured Salazar into it and left him to his fate, but I have always suspected the curse might take hold of him and his men. I have long since wanted to go back and check on them, but it seems I never did and this is the consequences of my never going back. I know Salazar. He hates pirates enough that he'll stay out there until the second coming and not even that will lead him away. He'll stay here until we come out and he kills us all, savvy."

"Then we just hand over to him you and make an accord with him." Ammand said as though it were the most logical solution in the world and Jack winced as his Da missed a note. No one else noticed, but Jack knew the song as well as his father did. If this meeting goes on for much longer, there won't be any Pirate Lords left.

"Salazar doesn't make bargains with pirates. He's not Beckett. He doesn't suffer fools or traitors. Chances are, he'll kill you lot before he deals with me, you can be sure of that."

"Then what is it you propose we do?" Jacord questioned this time, eying Jack in much the same manner Chevalle was. That was beginning to become unnerving, thank you very much.

"We appeal to Beckett's ego by meeting him for parley and then try to at least appease Salazar's ghost." Sparrow replied without hesitation. "The Devil's Triangle's curse targets restless, angry souls of its victims. Those who do not wish to cross to the other side. If we can somehow satisfy Salazar, then we'll have one completely immortal cursed ship less to worry about. Jones can easily be subdued if we are tricky enough to get his heart. Or stab the beating thing and make a new captain for the Flying Dutchman. The crew is bound to the ship, not who runs it. The Dutchman, for all that it is an indestructible ship, is the most vulnerable one. Especially with the Dead Man's Chest unlocked."

"And if the only way to appease Captain Salazar is your death?" Another chord is messed up, a bit more obviously, Teague's gaze now piercing through his son's head, daring him to agree to Sao Feng's offer.

"I'd let him do it. It would be only fair."

"No!"

"What are you talking about?!"

"Sparrow, are ya crazy!?"

"I vote for Jack Sparrow, the bravest of us all." The entire room fell silent as Chevalle stood up and stated his vote.

"Jack Sparrow," Jacord agreed, also standing up. Said man stared at them, wide eyed and open-mouthed with shock. His Pearl giggled encouragingly in his ear. Sao Feng looked around in panic and voted for himself. Barbossa also voted for himself, but Ching continued Jacord's and Chevalle's string, voting for Jack. Villanueva, Ammand and Sri Sumbhajeer voted for themselves and Jack was left staring. With three votes for him, it didn't matter if he even voted. It had been decided.

"What?" Was all the teen could say.

Chevalle shrugged. "You have a plan, we don't."

"You would sacrifice your life for us, who would rather run away and leave all behind like cowards. This is the only way to stop you from considering it." Ching explained, trying her best not to look proud of him.

"You know the enemy. You have helped us all in the past. It is the least we can do for a friend. There'd be no better Pirate King of the Brethren Court than you." The African man explained with a grin.

Sao Feng, Barbossa, Ammand, Villanueva and Sumbhajeer's advocate all protested, although the pirates watching the proceedings didn't seem to mind. Hey, who cares if he's a kid if he can save their asses, right?

"Am I to understand that you lot will not be keeping to the code, then?" A string finally snapped and Teague looked up with a thunderous expression on his face at Elizabeth's oh so innocent question and the protesting Pirate Lords fell silent once more.

"Very well." Eduardo said with great hesitation and displeasure. Ching ignored him, carefully climbing to her feet and turning in the direction she knew Jack to still be standing.

"What say you, Captain Sparrow, King of the Brethren Court?" Said man finally snapped out of it

and regarded every pirate in the room for a long moment, his hand coming to rest on his Compass, feeling it shake. They were close. Close enough that Jack wondered if they should just sail out right now and wait for them, but he knew they had to prepare first. These people ... They were all looking at him with the same expressions his crew had been, the day Captain Morgan had finally handed over Jack the Compass, expecting him to pull a miracle and save them from certain death at the guns of the Silent Mary. History was repeating itself. They *needed* him. His *friends* needed him if they all wanted to survive.

He decisively raised his head, back going straight and every ounce of the Teague family pride and his training as the future Keeper of the Code was visible in him in that moment. "Prepare every vessel that floats. At dawn..." He looked at his friends, sharing a specific look with his mates. "We're at war."

Sri Sumbhajee stood up, gaining the attention of the entire room as he took in a deep breath. "And so we shall go to war."

They all kind of just stared at him, for he had the squeakiest voice any of them had ever heard. Jack swore an eunuch didn't sound like that while they were doing the snip snip. "What?" He asked helplessly again as the room broke into cheers and battle cries. He had not expected this, but feeling the tremors of his Compass still, he figured it was for the best.

But as confused and shocked as he was, he didn't miss the nod Barbossa gave to Pintel and Ragetti, nor how the collected Pieces of Eight were not returned. He'll have to see to that before the night is up.



## Chapter 27

"Where have you been?" A worried James asked hours later, when Jack finally returned to his cabin aboard the Black Pearl, a good few hours after midnight. He had been starting to worry due to Sao Feng's men and the distaste some of the other Pirate Lords had shown for the new Pirate King and had started fearing they had gone and done something stupid. He relaxed now upon seeing Jack unharmed and safe, back where he can keep an eye out for him and protect him if the need arises.

"No need to worry, love!" Jack told him brightly as he perched himself on the seated ex Commodore's lap, carefully tucking away his effects like he did every night before falling asleep, this time making extra sure that nothing can fall out of his hidden pockets before smooching James on the lips. "I couldn't be protected better anywhere else in the world and that was *before* I was made Pirate King. As the Keeper's Heir, I have my own guards around this place. You saw them, Ivan and Ian. Scary duo, aren't they." He chuckled as he snuggled up to his older lover, almost purring in content when James' absently started playing with his hair and scratching his skull.

"That didn't really answer my question, Jack." Norrington sighed, sliding his arm around the lithe waist to better hold Jack to himself so he wouldn't be in danger of sliding off. "In fact, there are a lot more questions I'd rather like for you to answer."

"Shoot." Jack shrugged, not really all that interested in what questions James might want to ask. But for all that he appeared to be nonchalant about all of this, his mind was actually racing miles per second. Tomorrow was going to be one hell of a day and he was trying to figure out how he should go about it all. He hadn't been kidding or faking it when he had said he would allow himself to be killed if it would give the other pirates a fighting chance. Will had already told him of his plans - that now seemed all but forgotten, ever since he and Elizabeth finally made up some days ago - to stab the heart, take control of the Dutchman and liberate his father. Not that Jack would really let him. The blacksmith from Port Royal was still too young to bind himself to that duty and that ship, especially since he had someone who he loved so dearly. Jack wouldn't let him leave her behind. There were plenty of other fools who'd want immortality. He'd just have to fish them out and send them on their merry way.

"How did you really know that Sao Feng has betrayed us?" James wasn't sure when he had become a part of the piratical 'us', but he didn't really care anymore. He had no where else to return to anymore. Beckett would most definitely not want back one of the men who had brought back his most hated enemy. "When could you have possibly gotten such information?"

"I told the truth. A siren told me." Jack said a bit petulantly, pouting that he wasn't believed. Why does he feel people often discard half of the things he said as lies even if they were the truth? Is it a trend for his older self?

"I thought sirens aren't all that fond of you. Only mermaids."

"Not true." Sparrow protested and flicked James' nose in retribution for the slight against his charms, as though all sirens were immune to them. Although, they kind of were and kind of would rather see him dead, ever since that one time with the crew of the Barnacle. But not all sirens were displeased with him, either. "Regina, queen and mistress of all aquatic creatures, is rather fond of me, thank you very much. She told me some of her subjects have overheard the deals some weeks ago, after you lot set off to rescue me from my terrible prison, and she gladly told me. As queen of all things that breathe under water, she is forever grateful to me for looking out for mermaids and for not harming sirens since I have that power as I am immune to their songs. And since a

mermaid's kiss allows a man to practically breathe under water, she says I am one of hers so she pretty much treats me as such."

"So you *did* get to have your desired meeting, then?" Norrington had no idea when this could have happened, since they had all practically been glued to Jack ever since they found him de-aged in the foliage of that island where they were washed out from the Locker. No one had seen any more merfolk since Morveren's departure. "When did this happen?"

"When you were sleeping, before we made the Crossing, Jamie." Well, that would explain Jack's standing near an open porthole. He must have been musing on all that she had told him until James woke up. Thinking about that image stirred more than one interest, especially with a lapful of warm, content and willing pirate. "Any more questions?"

"Your tattoos ... What do they mean? And, actually, how did you know the Silent Mary was on her way? You seemed to know way before that messenger came by to inform you. Or was he supposed to inform us all?"

"Well, he was probably off to speak with the Keeper-"

"Who is your father. Another thing we need to discuss, if you don't mind."

"One question at a time, love." Jack chided with a teasing smirk, silencing any retort that might have come with a peck on the slightly parted lips. They snapped shut and the teen settled himself more comfortably against his lover as he started answering. "Anyway, he was probably off to tell my Da but kind of just ran into me, so he told me first. As the Keeper's Heir, I was quite possibly the second most powerful individual in pirate society. Can't believe I'm Pirate *King* now. That's gonna take more getting used to than the Captain and Sparrow thing." He mused to himself before getting back on track. "Anyway, that means he has to listen to me as though I'm his boss so he asked me for orders, which I gave. As for how I know about the Mary's coming," he reached for his Compass that was neatly placed on top of his coat but beneath his hat and opened it, letting James see the moving needle. Even when Jack handed it over to the older male, it didn't change as it should have done normally. "The Compass, as long as you are loyal to it, will show you the way to what your heart wants most."

"As you've told me a number of times already." James nodded as he handed the device back. "So why is it broken *this* time?"

"It's not. It's working perfectly. For you see, you *must* stay loyal to the Compass or else it will lead your greatest fear to you." Jack explained, tucking away the trembling navigation gadget.

"And yours is Salazar?" The skeptical ex Admiral and ex Commodore asked warily. Because that just didn't seem like Jack. The man had, in the end, returned to face certain death just to be with his ship in her second sinking. Sure, Elizabeth had forced him to stay but he could have very well just kept rowing and never looked back. It seemed unusual that Jack would fear a single man.

Said Pirate King just shrugged. "Salazar is the greatest nightmare and fear of all of pirate kind." He said, never quite answering James' question. Norrington sighed through his nose, already seeing where that was going - to a dead end. Better focus on other things lest he never get any other answers.

"What about your tattoos? I've been fascinated with them for a while now." Ever since he'd seen them, actually. He had never seen an array of tattoos like the ones decorating Jack's skin.

"Ah, the text on my back, aye?" His lover just nodded so Jack shrugged off his shirt and wiggled a

little until his back was presented to curious eyes. "What do you think it is?"

James looked curiously at the inked images on his young lover's back and gently traced them as he tried to make out the elaborate handwriting. It took him less than a minute to pull back as though burned as he recognized some of the few rules of the Code he knew of, only worded far more eloquently, as though written by a scholar.

*Every man shall have an equal vote in affairs of moment. He shall have an equal title to the fresh provisions or strong liquors at any time seized, and shall use them at pleasure unless a scarcity may make it necessary for the common good that a retrenchment may be voted.*

*Every man shall be called fairly in turn by the list on board of prizes, because over and above their proper share, they are allowed a shift of clothes. But if they defraud the company to the value of even one dollar in plate, jewels or money, they shall be marooned. If any man rob another he shall have his nose and ears slit, and be put ashore where he shall be sure to encounter hardships.*

*And things like None shall game for money either with dice or cards.*

*Each man shall keep his piece, cutlass and pistols at all times clean and ready for action.*

*He that shall desert the ship or his quarters in time of battle shall be punished by death or marooning.*

And so on and so on. All in a careful hand, all of it worded like any law might be, if only a bit more simply so everyone could understand. It was not simple do this and do that. Although not nearly so as open to interpretation as Will and Elizabeth once suggested after their dealings with Barbossa and Sparrow and their crews, it was not nearly as restraining or unbending as land laws. Some of them even sounded more like reasonable suggestions than rules. James read all eleven that were inked into Jack's skin, wondering why on earth someone would go through all that pain of getting a tattoo like this.

"As I already told you, I am the Keeper's Heir and his only son. Da trained me for picking up his duty after him if anything were to happen to him or if he simply thought it was time for him to retire for good. As a youth, I had been educated more than your bloody princes and princesses and queens and kings and emperors and priests and the like, had been taught the Code since I was four but I was a little kid who had to be protected most of the time. At eight, though, I got this tattoo willingly, proud of being my father's son. That was before the second time Grandmama nearly best me to death. After that happened a bit later, I grew a bit resentful of it and never showed it to anyone until I met Tia Dalma. That circle on my back, amid the text? A sign of Calypso's favor and a protection charm against dark magic. There are rare few spells stronger than it, so it keeps me very safe in that regard. Only some voodoo is stronger, I hear. Anyway, she was the first who saw my tattoos since that one beating. I didn't even let the Cove's doctor see under my shirt after that third time."

James watched with a disgusted and incredulous face as a shiver ran down the entire body of his lover. "Your own bloody grandmother beat you near to death!? How many times!? Why did your supposedly overprotective father allow this!?"

Jack looked away and shrugged, not wanting to meet James' gaze. "Grandmama is his mother so he probably figured she won't be violent with his only child. And he was often so busy around the Cove that we at times didn't speak or see each other for three days straight if we didn't go out of our way to seek each other out. Sure, he always made some time for me, if only to come and check on me well after my 'bed time' and it always left me giddy that he'd leave his work for me if I asked. But I knew his job was important and so I left him to it, learning the family business from

the rest of our family. Unfortunately, Grandmama was a rough and toughened pirate of near eighty when I started my studies and, as much as she loved me - do you know she actually nearly died of grief when I first ran away? I didn't believe it, either, until I saw her still so frail from it when Da and I returned on the *Misty Lady* - she didn't know how else to express it than with violence. My lip didn't really help when I got sick of it all. Da very nearly killed her after that second time. I had been in really bad shape for weeks. Had Aunt McFlaming not arrived when she did, I wouldn't be Pirate King now."

He smiled bitterly and James gently turned his face around so they were looking at each other. "That's not love, Jack. That's abuse."

"I wanted to hate her for it for years. Did, even, for a few. But she was still the same Grandmama who would on some days take me with her to her beautiful ship and take around the region. Old she may be but she's a lively one, my Grandmama. She'd tell me stories, about Granda and about his Da before him. Piracy is in my blood, mate." Jack said with a sardonic little smile. He pointed at the other circle that was on his bicep, the one with the hidden swords. "Before this was the symbol of the Keeper of the Code and all who serve him, it was the symbol of our family. Grandmama married in but she survived. She became the second Pirate Lord of the Atlantic-"

"So you're third in your family to be a Pirate Lord?" James was impressed. It would seem his and Jack's lives weren't entirely so different, after all. James *was* the third Admiral in his own family, albeit the youngest and the one with the shortest commission. Then again, Jack was the youngest Pirate Lord ever, if he was to be believed. And he was. *Eighteen*. How much younger than that could one get?

Sparrow's eyes were suddenly twinkling excitedly with mischief. The teen turned around so they were face to face again and leaned in until his lips were against James' ear and he breathed a secret to the ex Commodore meant for no one but those of Teague blood to hear. "Actually, love, you didn't let me finish. The first to bear this symbol, this mark, was my great grandfather, Alexander Jackson Teague, first Pirate Lord of the Caribbean, the very first to sail into this very Cove, the first to make a deal with Jones. The first Pirate King of the Brethren Court. The seed of the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, aye?"

Norrington's jaw dropped and he gawked at his lover as though he had told him it was the Armageddon and James hadn't noticed. The wicked glint in Jack's eyes wasn't quite enough to snap James out of his stupor. This, on top of everything, was too much. Yes, he had accepted pirates had hierarchy like 'normal' society had. Yes, he had accepted that they had 'nobility' like they did, only ruling over far more territory than any noble or monarch could, since we were talking about seas here. And yes, he had accepted that there are quite a few similarities in the law and in the Code. The structure of their society was almost as complex as that on solid land. He'd even accepted that Jack was a noble of sorts, a vice-judge and now a King.

But he had never expected, even from Jack Sparrow, to be of what was apparently a royal bloodline. At least amongst pirates. He was hopelessly lost and Jack was laughing at him.

"Come now, Jamie! This can't be the weirdest thing you've heard of so far!"

"Actually, I've come to expect mythical creatures and sea monsters where you are concerned." And wasn't that just a sad fact of both their lives that such things no longer fazed either of them beyond the need to survive them. "This ... Dear God, Jack. Why did you ever run away?" Then he winced at the stupidity of his own question and went to apologize but Jack beat him to it.

"Because I wanted freedom." He replied, ignoring the fact his family was batshit crazy and that his own grandmother used to beat him within an inch of his life. James was still trying to see how you

could still hold any sort of affection for someone who treated you like that. But he knew of Jack's too forgiving nature. By all rights, Barbossa, James, Will and Elizabeth, along with those two idiots Pintel and Ragetti, should all have been left in the Locker for having betrayed their Captain and yet here they were, no one but Gibbs, Cotton and Marty any wiser about it, in the protection of the Cove and James in the comfort of the cabin of the new Pirate King.

"Didn't you get enough of it as the Keeper's Heir? I imagine you could do almost anything you wanted around here." He commented as he absently traced the chain tattoo going around Jack's left bicep.

Jack seemed to be melting under his touch. "Not nearly enough. Overprotective immediate family aside, I was always watched, people always fretting, fearing my father's or god forbid my Grandmama's ire if I got hurt. I was suffocating. I loved learning, aye, but I was born out at sea and the Cove doesn't have nearly enough of it. There was no seemingly endless horizon before me and I *craved* that. So when I was sent to learn sailing from all around the world, I was very glad for the opportunity. Sailing with that Sao Feng's uncle, Liang Dao, was my first experience away from home and he thought me some of the first things I know now. I wish he were still alive. He was a good man, that one."

Norrington frowned in thought. "Jack, just how old *were* you when you saw the entire world?"

"I doubt I saw the *entire* world even now, twenty years later, but I *have* seen all seven seas and more before I hit double digits. I think I liked the Nile the best. That's quite a cruise." James just shook his head and decided he shouldn't have been surprised. Jack bit his lip and hesitated for a moment before speaking, voice a bit meek. "Do you think I'll ... remember ... When I return back to normal?"

James ... hadn't actually thought of that. Tia Dalma had never said anything about what will be after her spell wears off, only that Jack had needed the reprieve and that if he didn't get it, the Jack they all knew could very well forever be gone. But Norrington found himself not wanting to give up *this* Jack, either. This Jack was a lot more open and drank a lot less and didn't lie nearly as often and ... And he was still hurting and not the Jack Sparrow who had the experience needed to survive in a world where he had had twenty years to make enemies. And this Jack had had his chance to live. What about the Jack that had so desperately fought and clung to his life and freedom.

For Jack Sparrow *was* freedom. And it would be as much a cage to leave him like this as it would be to lock him up in a cage.

"I don't know. Do you want to?" James knew he did. He wanted Jack to remember how much everyone had cared and worried and fretted. He wanted Jack to remember their quiet night on the deck or in the crow's nest. He wanted Jack to remember being chosen for the Pirate King. He wanted Jack to remember *this*. He was suddenly scared that he wouldn't and was contemplating begging Tia Dalma to let Jack remember when Jack's words broke him out of his thoughts.

"If I don't, promise me you will remind me?" Jack didn't want himself to forget, either. He was *desperate* for it, not forgetting. He had had too much fun, telling stories, fishing, singing, dancing, fencing, laughing, pirating ... He didn't want to forget falling in love again or the healing of his heart. He didn't want to forget *James*.

"I give you my solemn word." The older replied, sealing it with a kiss, which turned into another and another, all short, slow and sweet. When they finally pulled away, James quirked an eyebrow at his lover and drawled in a deadpan voice. "You still haven't answered my first question."

Jack outright laughed at that, nearly falling off of his perch in James' laugh had Norrington not

reached up to catch him. When he was finished, he decided it won't hurt anyone and reached over for his coat as he answered. "Well, I first had to finish some things of a more Code-keeping nature with Da regarding Sao Feng and Barbossa - they were lucky I was there and managed to stop him from outright shooting them. They owe me, now - and then Da dragged me off to see the others. My Uncle Jack was most joyous to see me-"

"His name is Jack, too?" James interrupted, surprised Jack had been named after his uncle and not his father like William had been. Jack shrugged.

"Actually, his name is Jackson, after their Da, who shared the name with *his* Da, even if it had been his middle name. I'm simply *Jack*. My full name is Jack Edward Teague, if you must know."

"So you both continue and break the tradition?" Norrington asked. He didn't need to tell Jack that the L. was for Lawrence, after his own father. Jack already probably had it figured out.

"Do you want to know where I've been or not?" The new Pirate King pouted and James chuckled, motioning for him to carry on. "Well, anyway, I've had a little family reunion. I swear Grandmama was almost near tears and Aunt McFlaming had actually sobered up upon lying eyes on me. And Valerie was most surprised. I swear she was trying to worm herself into the position of the Heir, but fat chance Da was going to accept that. I won't, either, although she might have to. I can't be both King and Keeper." He mused to himself before shaking those thoughts off and going back to his story. "After that, I just came back here and ... waited for the opportune moment to get *these*." He took out a sack from one of his many hidden pockets and showed its contents to James.

"You didn't?" But James already knew he had and was chuckling. Jack just grinned."as if I'd let that old bastard get one up on me. *These*," he jiggled the sack. "Will be properly used only when *I* say they should be used. No need to release a fury worse than hell's on us all at an already too precarious time."

"You are the best pirate I've ever seen."

Jack preened at the compliment.

## Chapter 28

The next morning, the pirate fleet was the first to get to the potential battlefield, just enough leagues away from the Island for maneuvering but still close enough that they could head back to the Crossing if worse came to worst. Thankfully, Jack's plan about the whole parlay thing had panned out quite well and Beckett seemed almost eager for it, answering their offered flag with his own within moments of seeing it. However, seeing the armada as well as the two cursed ships ... It kind of had a very bad effect on morale but Jack, if no one else, didn't seem bothered by it. Although he was anxious and only Gibbs and Frederico seemed to know why.

The group that went to the little island in the middle of the potential battlefield that was actually a small sand dune like spit of land, maybe a total of twenty meters in length and about seven in width, consisted of Jack, Barbossa - who was probably aiming to snatch away Jack's Piece of Eight and go on with his plan - James - who refused to let Jack go alone - and Elizabeth who was actually following Will and *he* was only going because of his father - not that *he* was likely to be there. Frederico had wanted to insist on going and Jack had been tempted to have at least *one* person there as a supporter who *knew* what he was supporting but he had sensed the shifty insecurity of the crew and knew Sanchez could put the fear of god into them far worse than their fear of the armada awaiting on the other side. So Frederico had to stay behind with Gibbs and Jack had to trust them - and a few of the Keeper's men that his father had insisted stay at all times with Jack, including Ivan and Ian (who he had actually *forced* to stay behind on the Pearl) - to keep his ship for him. And with the Keeper's own little fleet not far behind the Pearl, it was not likely they would dare. But fear bred bravery, if that made sense. Or was it foolishness? Anyway, in desperation, if they tried anything, they won't be getting too far.

On the other side of the sandy little island stood three figures, two of which Jack had never seen before but bred a lot of negative reactions from his beloved Black Pearl. The third person was not hard to distinguish. You could recognize Davy Jones in all his sea-creature-covered glory with ease, no matter the distance. The shortest in the group must have been Beckett, Jack mused, but who was the third person? Jack knew who it *wasn't* and he was a bit disappointed. Okay, a *lot*, actually, but perhaps it was better this way. It meant he could focus on the matter at hand and not ... Well, personal matters that have apparently been closed and done with for twenty years now. He needed to focus on this Beckett and his control over Jones. The Flying Dutchman is a powerful weapon, one that should not have been made into a weapon in the first place. Jack, as the second Pirate King, will have to deal with him now.

"Well, well, well. The rumors apparently *are* true, Captain Jones. Jack Sparrow obviously *has* escaped from your Locker. How very not unexpected." Lord Cutler Beckett, standing in the middle between the Captain of the Flying Dutchman and his secretary-assassin, Ian Mercer, clad in his brown trenchcoat and fine clothing with what looked like a very expensive captain's hat on his head, commented with a pleased little smile that had Norrington pulling Jack back as if he wanted to put himself physically between the teen and the Lord of the East India Trading Company. And indeed, Beckett's eyes were solely trained on Jack until they noticed James' protective stance. He hadn't yet realized that Jack hadn't just shaved off his beard and mustache. "And Admiral Norrington! How nice of you to join us. It seems that my hospitality and good will

to reinstate you have not been enough so you once again ran off with pirates. You've made such a poor choice in captains, dear James, it makes me want to pity you." His demeanor turned coldly as if a switch had been flipped as he glared at the tallest man present, Jones sea creature bulk not included. "Except you have brought the very bane of my existence back from a well deserved fate. That does not put you high in my regards, Admiral."

"I've not been an Admiral for well over a month, Beckett. Do stop using the wrong form of address and my given name, for I have never given you the liberty to use it." If Beckett's words were cold, James' were icy, colder than the entrance to the World's End. His tone was a sharp, sardonic, sarcastic, disdainful drawl he had used with Sparrow on their first meeting but they held no bitterness when he spoke of his title. Come to think of it, James had not mentioned his title or duty at all since the Pearl's core crew all but kidnapped him from Singapore. As though he had *wanted* to go but had never gotten the chance to do so willingly before they had knocked him over the head and dragged him away, his Lieutenants following like lost puppies after a potential new owner. "And Captain Sparrow was more than worth being in your less than good graces. It almost came as a bonus."

"Ah, so you're the bloody blighter that set fire to my Wench!" Jack exclaimed, sounding like his usual, cheery, deceptively uncaring self but his smile was sharp and his eyes were flashing like lightning in a storm. You didn't need Tia Dalma's uncanny abilities at reading people to know he was *furious*. "Well, it's always a pleasure to meet the man who ruined your life."

At his strange words, all three men looked closely at Sparrow, as though trying to figure out how crazy he was *this* time around, when it finally registered ... Just how *young* he was. Jones gaped like a fish - pun completely intended - while Beckett was gawking, eyes wide, as he stared at a Jack younger than even he had met. Mercer had not met Sparrow before but even he was surprised by the youthful appearance of someone who should have been nearly forty.

Suddenly, Jones - in his little bucket of seawater he was using since he couldn't step on land for almost a decade - growled like a caged beast and bellowed to the wind in rage. "CALYPSO!" And on the Black Pearl, watching from the distance, Tia Dalma enjoyed his rage and the frightened flinching of the pirates all around her. So her Jones had seen her Witty Jack? Let the games begin.

Back on the island, Jack also winced, more because of the loudness and suddenness of the yell than out of fear, before grinning in a way he knew most found very annoying when sent their way.

"Yup. Calypso dearest and I are very close mates. Have been since I was about ye high," he placed his hand at about at lower chest region to indicate his even younger self's height. "And was causing trouble left and right as a twelve year old kid of a pirate who didn't want to be a pirate but was more pirate than grownup pirates. Had her blessing since. I'd show you, but that would require me showing off some other things that I'm not keen on sharing with complete strangers."

Jones just growled at him, which made Jack's grin wider. Mercer was staring at him as though he's grown a second head. "You're *mad*." He said almost incredulously and Jack just chuckled.

"Thank goodness for that or else this wouldn't work." He paused, looked back over his shoulder and hummed mock thoughtfully. "Well, not nearly as good as it had. Seriously, there's more pirate in me than in all those people over there put together." He looked back to Beckett and all the good humor that had been present was absent. "What do you want?"

"Excuse me?" The startled Lord asked with a perplexed blink, not sure what to make of any of this. This Jack was so different to the Jack he had come to know while he worked for him but there were some traits of his that Beckett recognized. He was not prepared for *this* Sparrow. He had been ready for the Black Pearl's eccentric Captain, not the Captain of the Wicked Wench. All those



who've never met the pirate before his sails became black would not see the difference between those two sides of Jack, especially since it was the same ship. Beckett knew better. He was weary of facing this Jack Sparrow again.

He wasn't even aware that *this* Jack was *leagues* different from the Jack that had worked for him.

"What do you want? Why did you go out of your way to get the heart? What do you get out of this?"

Now Beckett looked at him as though he *was* mad. "Are you daft, boy? I get the power of the sea, a weapon, an *ultimate weapon*. One even you fear. One that could take down even *you*." He smiled mockingly at him. "And he did. It was obviously worth it."

"I don't fear Jones." Jack told him, huffing, clearly offended at the mere thought of it. "Why should I? And that aside, since I'm still alive and my Pearl is still singing, I'd say he wasn't exactly as successful as you thought. Not such an ultimate, unstoppable weapon, aye?" He scuffed again. "He's not enough, is that it? That's why you have your little armada with you?" He grinned at Jones insufferably again. "You losing your touch in your old age? You couldn't even keep one mortal in your little Locker. But, then again, I *am* Captain Jack Sparrow."

"If it is not me or Captain Jones that you fear, Jack," Beckett drawled, losing patience with the teen now that it was obvious that Jack actually *wasn't* afraid of them in the least. He wasn't. You could see it in his eyes. He was weary but he held no fear for them, at least not a personal fear. He knew what Jones could do and was not foolish enough to dismiss him but he didn't cower before him, either. And every time he looked at Beckett, there was more anger than any other emotion flashing in his eyes, probably a result of him finding out what had happened to his beloved ship on Beckett's command, although Beckett didn't know who could have told him about that. As far as he knew, Jack didn't talk about it, but that didn't really matter now. What mattered was finally dealing with Sparrow and removing this one man that always somehow foiled Beckett's plans forever out of the way. "If not the devil himself ... Then what *do* you fear?" He stepped closer, under the watchful eye of Mercer, of course, since his approach caused more than one person to reach for their weapons, especially Miss Swann. She looked about ready to rip him apart, limb from limb, no doubt because of her learning her father's fate. They were almost chest to chest, that was how close he dared venture, so he can whisper into Jack's ear - thank god he was shorter as a teen or else Beckett would have had to stand on his toes to reach it. "Do you fear death?"

Sparrow frowned at the short man borrowing the line he *knew* Jones always asked but his eyes strayed upwards, over the Lord's shoulder and his breath was knocked out of him when black eyes fell on the husk of the Silent Mary. Something must have shown on his face because Beckett chuckled menacingly, obviously thinking he had won.

"You are right, Jack, as always. The Flying Dutchman wasn't enough."

"Don't you fear the gods, man?" Jack asked, breathless, as he stared at a ship he had once known every crook and cranny of, better than her own crew at times, due to his being unable to stay still for too long. She looked like a shadow of her former self and Jack shuddered to think on whether the crew was still indeed on her decks. He futilely hoped they had all passed on relatively quickly and had crossed to the other side instead of indeed being cursed by the Devil's Triangle as he feared. "You've dared try and tame the sea by making its lord and the farrier of the dead your lap dog. I know at least one goddess that's not happy with you."

"Why should I fear a flesh-bound goddess when I have such a wonderful lapdog? And did you know, he brought a friend?" Cutler's smirk was sharp and cold and cruel. "I must say, having El Matador Del Mar at my disposal is quite the treat. Do you think he will make an even greater

lapdog? So proud, he is. Watching him slowly break and fall apart will be so satisfactory when he realizes I have no intention of letting him go. All he wants is a little revenge. I imagine he will be quite disappointed when I don't give it to him."

With a snarl that surprised everyone with its ferocity, Jack lunged at Beckett, an uncontrollable rage taking him at what Beckett had said. If i had not been for James, he would have broken the rules of parley and a lot of things would have gone down the drain with their new Pirate King. As it was, James was struggling to hold Jack back around the waist as his young lover trashed and reached for the now scared and startled Beckett, who was watching with wide eyes as Sparrow tried to wring his neck with his own bare hands, cursing him in every language he knew. Which turned out to be a lot. Thankfully, he stuck mostly to English and Spanish as he spat on the Lord's name, cursed his bloodline and threw insults and death threats around like rice at a wedding.

In all that commotion, as everyone stared at Sparrow, flabbergasted, they didn't even register the approach of one more person from the sea, walking on top of the shallows until this new arrival chuckled. Jack froze mid curse, mid flail at the familiar sound, going absolutely still, eyes widening and skipping over to the left shoreline, where there stood a man. A ghost. A smiling, chuckling ghost that was probably the nightmare of any man who calls himself a pirate except the new Pirate King. Beckett and Mercer were uneasy at the appearance of the black-dressed, blue-skinned ghost, Jones was leering at him and the Pearl's group was staring with wide eyes, agape mouths and fear and disgust in their eyes and on their faces.

The cursed ghost of one Capitán Armando Salazar of the Silent Mary had eyes only for the youngest one on the island and his smile was gentle and fond. "I see you are still as feisty with your Spanish, my little Sparrow. You would do Santos proud."

With a strangled noise tearing out of his throat, Jack wrenched himself free from James' arms and, expertly avoiding Jones, ran straight for the ghost. At his friend's alarmed cries, he stopped not quite within arm's reach but his hand still reached hesitatingly for Salazar, eyes bright with tears as he beheld the face of his once lover. Beckett's group watched in confusion as the Spaniard used the little waves to take a step closer but then had to back up lest his ghost disintegrate since he was not allowed to step on land at all, as if eager to touch Sparrow, to be closer.

"You look well, my little Sparrow." Salazar complimented, his eyes rowing over the younger's body, seeing that he was not hurt and was well dressed. The relief he felt was short lived, however, when he realized Jack had seemingly not aged a day since their last encounter and Salazar knew that to be a good two decades ago. "Do not tell me you have died young or I will be very displeased with you, my little Sparrow."

Jack gave a hollow laugh, eyes shining even more. "I died a year ago, or so I heard. Kraken swallowed me whole, along with my Wench - well, her name is the Black Pearl these days - and I was brought back a month or so ago. I was in a bad way and this was the only solution. Damn, I'm telling this story too often." He shook his head and reached up with a hand to brush the first tear that slid down his cheek at the same time Salazar did the same. Without hesitation and for once not listening to his friends at all, Jack stepped closer and was touched, for the first time in far too long, no matter how you look at it, by the Spaniard once more. A shaky smile stretched across his lips at the worry he saw in those once again sparking eyes.

Salazar was giving Jones a nasty look as he knew only the Flying Dutchman's Captain can order to great beast to hunt and he was not pleased with what he heard, but he drew his attention back to the teen when Jack leaned more into his touch, enjoying it despite his hands being ice cold. The Captain of the Silent Mary knew his eyes had gentled in a way he would prefer the others not to see but he could not help himself. This was his little Sparrow. "You do some many unthinkable things,

my little Sparrow."

Jack laughed slightly, the sound choked with tears that he did not let be shed further. "What can I say, love? I'm Captain Jack Sparrow!" He brought his hand up to lay it over Salazar's cracked one, nuzzling into the gentle touch. The others were shocked at the scene playing before them, so shocked that they could not even think, let alone react.

The Spaniard suddenly looked impossibly pleased, smug, thankful and outright proud and loving as a cold finger stroked a tanned cheek. "You kept the name I gave you." He said in awe, his voice becoming warm and happiness the likes of which he had not felt for far too long returning to him to fill him up from the inside out.

"Armando," Jack choked out, a tear falling despite his best efforts and he lunged into said man's awaiting arms, hugging the ghost tight. The Black Pearl's crew gaped at the name that had just tumbled off of Jack's lips, for they had heard him say it more than once in his many stories and they knew him as the man who had loved Jack so much he had followed him to his own ruin. James, who knew he was also Jack's long term lover whom Jack had led to his death and still mourned, did his best not to feel disheartened or jealous that this dead man held all of Jack's affections even so long after his death while he longed for it even now. He should have expected this. "Idiot. Of course I kept the name, you were only bellowing it as you ordered your crew to chase me. They all heard and it spread like wildfire. Idiot. *Mi estúpido amor*. Of course I kept the bloody name *you* gave me. Precious to me as my ship, as my Compass. *Español loco*."

"*Si, estoy muy loco. Loco por ti, mi Sparrow*." Armando whispered lovingly to the teen's hair, enjoying his scent and the feel of him against his body that was, somehow, slowly, surely shedding the curse. Ghost he may still be but before them now stood the great man he had once been now that he had gotten this one last chance to hold the one that possessed his heart. "*Solo para ti. Mi corazón es tuyo*."

"*Y mi corazón es para siempre tu buque, mi Capitán*." When Jack looked up after that old exchange that had always melted both of their hearts, he gasped in delighted shock upon seeing the very Capitán he had fallen in love with, dressed in his black and white assemblage with his hair pulled back in that low bun like style, everything polished and primed to perfection, not a sign of the curse left. He felt solid in his hold but Jack could not feel a heartbeat from him. "Armando?"

"I must leave you, *mi amor*." Salazar told him as he bent a little lower and brushed a kiss on his forehead. In the distance, the ghost ship had been restored to its previous glory, the pride of the Spanish Royal Navy but the fear of all pirates but the one who had scaled her rigging, tarred her bilge, mended her sails, tied her lines, held her helm and stole the hearts of her Captain and crew. Cheers could be heard coming from the vessel as the Spaniards celebrated their freedom of their curse and soon to be found peace. "We do not belong here anymore. And you have a new life to look forward to, so do not mourn our passing. I only regret not seeing the marvelous man you have become."

"Please don't leave me. Not again. *Por favor, no te vayas. Te amo*." He begged almost desperately but only got one more kiss on the forehead for his efforts before Armando detangled himself from the new Pirate King. "I need you!"

The Spaniard smiled sadly and took one more step back, and another and another for each one that Jack took into the shallows, shaking his head. "Your *corazón* is now guarded and held tight by another, my little Sparrow. You have given it freely, so do not throw this away for an old ghost."

"How-"

Salazar chuckled as he slowly started fading away. "I've loved you too long not to see that sparkle in your eye, my little Sparrow. Now, you be good, *si*?" He was almost completely gone when Jack lunged for him again, taking hold of his head and yanking him down for one last, desperate, goodbye kiss. "*Adiós*, Jack Sparrow."

One last tear slipped past Jack control when the ghost and his ship were finally fully gone, his fists clenched at his sides, shaking. He had just lost the person he loved for the second time and he was, once again, not allowed to mourn him as he had a job to do. Back straight, head held high, Jack rounded on his heels and glared at the flabbergasted trio of cruel, ruthless men that opposed his own group. The fire in his eyes must have been of the cold sort, for they flinched away at the sight of it.

Jones stared, wide eyed, at the boy, a different image coming to his mind and he, for the first time, saw the resemblance Jack Sparrow bore to a man long since dead.

"I will kill you," he told them calmly. His voice held a dangerous, deadly edge and his words were a promise, an oath, a warning. This was no idle threat. "I will kill all three of you for all that you have done, for the pain and sadness you have caused, for the lives you have taken. And *so help you the gods*, for you will need it, as you have *no idea* who you have just made a serious enemy out of."

"Do you believe we should fear you? *You*?" Beckett asked condescendingly when he got his bearings back, a sneer overtaking his would-be impassive face. "There is nothing to fear as you are now. The Jack I've come to know-"

"Is a mask, or so I hear." Jack sneered right back. "You don't know who you're dealing with. Men far greater than *you*," he appraised Beckett with his black eyes and made an expression that suggested he found him seriously wanting, much to the short man's ire. "Have fallen before my feet. If you thought fighting ghosts would scare me, that monsters terrify me, that the supernatural or curses being real can surprise me, you obviously don't know me at all. Ask your little lapdog about my adventures and you'll know you're way in over your head. And *you*," he turned his burning eyes on Jones, who was bristling at the constant mutt references. "You should feel ashamed of yourself. Embarrassed. Look who you are serving! Do you fear death so much?" He mocked and Jones looked ready to lunge for him but Jack didn't so much as bat an eyelash at him as he boldly turned his back on all three of them as he came to stand with his group. "My great grandfather took your side in your little feud with your beau, but I've always been more of a lady's man. This lovers' spat that lasted decades is coming to an end *today*, Jones."

"Ya are declarin' war against us, Sparrow," Davy Jones leered from his bucket. "Only th' Pirate King can do that an' there's not been one since th' first Brethren Court sealed Calypso."

"Yes, Pirate King Alexander Teague made a grave mistake, I agree with Barbossa on that." He ignored the choking sounds everyone but James was making behind his back again. He was sure Barbossa was also gaping like a fish that he might be getting his way. "It is only right for his great grandson to right his wrong. My great grandfather stood by you, Jones. I stand by Calypso and wish you all the best. I heard her ire was terrible."

Jack turned on his heel and started marching past his companions towards the rowboat. James was the first to go after him, keeping a weary eye on the assassin-secretary Mercer, even flabbergasted as he was. Beckett tried to call after him that if they surrender now, only most will die but if they fight, *all* will die. Jack didn't so much as turn around as he whipped around like a tornado with a thunderous scowl on his face.

"No, mate. If *you* surrender to *me* now, I will let you live. I will *let* you live." Without another

word, Jack was once again heading back towards the rowboat. He heard Elizabeth exchange a few snappy comments with Beckett, raging at what he had done to her father, and Will promising Jones that he *will* free his father before they and Barbossa fell in step behind the emotionally turbulent Pirate King and his lover. When they got into the rowboat, Jack ignored the young couple's staring and Barbossa's appraising look as he sat himself as close to James as he physically could without being in the taller man's lap. William rowed them back towards the Black Pearl in an uncomfortable silence, Elizabeth biting back her curiosity at the look in Jack's eyes, so torn, so angry, so sad and yet so relieved while Jack just held tight onto James' hand, needing his grounding presence more than ever before. James held back, realizing that the teen needed him and that he can think about all that has happened between Jack and the ghost of his lover Armando Salazar on the island later, when they actually have the time to maybe discuss it as well as what their own relationship might be.

"Ye're goin' alon' with me plan, then?" Barbossa cut through the silence with his question like a knife through butter and Jack looked up. His eyes, they fount it disconcerting, were the same eyes of his older self, especially in that moment when he had finally exacted his revenge on Barbossa after ten long years. It felt ... wrong to see those eyes on this young teenager. How could they have placed such a great burden on this lad of eighteen years? "Ye'll free Calypso?"

"Tia Dalma, or Calypso, as I've said many times by now, has always been a great friend. It is why I know her so well. She will not let what the first Brethren Court did go that easily. She is a woman wronged and scorned and she will take great pleasure in showing us why we should fear her." Sparrow said, explaining his case. "However, as dangerous as she is, she *does* care for me as much as I for her. I guess I continued occasionally visiting her over the years, bringing her gifts from wherever I've been to before said visits. She didn't have to go to such great lengths to get my Piece of Eight. She needn't have given me this reprieve for my sanity."

"Then why did you refuse to free her before the Brethren Court?" A curious Will asked as they approached the Pearl. The black ship sang of comfort to her Captain and Jack felt his heart settle a little.

"Because she would have power only over the seas. It sounds like much but the Flying Dutchman is indestructible and the Silent Mary was a cursed ship of ghosts. They'd have survived whatever the armada didn't and Beckett or no Beckett, had Armando not decided to pass on, he would have hunted us down to extinction."

"I don't get what you're aiming at, Jack." The only woman in the boat sighed in exasperation but the Pirate Lord of the Caribbean just smiled at her.

"I didn't expect to be made King, I'll agree with that, but I knew with a King, I could make them consider parlay. I actually thought whoever would be named King would just hand me over to Beckett and be done with it. I would, as such, thus have a chance to speak with Armando and try to diffuse his anger so he can pass on, free from the Triangle's curse. As it is, it worked for the better."

"And the war?" James asked then, trying to understand Jack's logic. It wasn't that hard just ... Strange. Rare few would sacrifice everything they are for people who would betray you without a second's hesitation. Then again, Jack had continued doing this throughout his life, it would seem. Elizabeth, Will, James ... Was Jack foolish? Or truly wise, to leave them all in his debt? He could come collecting whenever he choses and yet he never does. Was he a masochist? If so, James will need to look out better for him. If Jack himself allows him to, that is. Their relationship was still on shaky ground.

"Had to be done, whatever happened with Armando or whatever happens with Calypso. A united front had to be made, for some *will* survive to tell this tale. The world needs to know that we can fight together against our enemies if we wish so so they will never again try to wipe us out." Jack said with that strange wisdom of his. "Besides, there's no turning back for Davy Jones. He's made his bed the day he told the first Brethren Court how to bind Calypso. He will give us no quarter. We ought to face him head on than suffer his chase."

"If I didn't know no better, Jack Sparrow, I'd say that be a plan an' not yer usual *modus operandi*." Hector commented, although he was pleased with his once Captain's thinking.

"*Mobilis in mobili*," Jack replied with a wry grin just as their little rowboat bumped gently against the Black Pearl's hull. He called out to Gibbs to haul them up, turning to give James a peck on the lips that had their three companions gawking again before waiting for the rowboat to be level with the railing. He jumped out and sauntered to where Calypso, still disguised as the swamp voodoo witch Tia Dalma, was watching the Flying Dutchman in the distance. He placed a hand on her shoulder, seizing her attention. "Time to be free, luv."

"Ya trust yer ol' Tia, aye? Witty Jack."

"Like I trust the sea." That got him a laugh and Jack smiled at her. She placed a hand on his cheek, caressing it the way she had when he had first woken up twenty years into his own future. "Do I need to barter for our safety like I did the Compass?"

"Ya needn't've bartered for it den so ya needn't barter fer dis now." She dismissed him, studying him closely with her all knowing eyes. "Ya keep bein' Tia's Witty Jack, aye?"

"Always," Jack said sincerely and smiled at the affectionate pat she gave his cheek. He stepped back and gave her a deep bow, knowing his crew was watching in curiosity. He took out of his pocket the sack that contained all the Pieces of Eight but his own and presented it to her. "Ave, Calypso." He told her with flair as he took off the only bead not directly woven into his hair but hanging over his red bandanna, ignoring the nervous murmuring and fearful gasps from the crew. "*Morituri te salutant*." Barbossa was too busy giving his two ninnies the stink eye to be angry at Sparrow for managing to nick it off of them.

"Not if I can 'elp it, Jack Sparra." Calypso said in a rumbling purr as Jack prepared the ritual.

The chaos was just beginning.

## Chapter 29

In return for her freedom, Calypso had gone and created a maelstrom in the middle of the soon to be battlefield just as the Black Pearl, under the command of Pirate King Captain Jack Sparrow, and the Flying Dutchman, under the command of Davy Jones but ordered around by Lord Cutler Beckett, lurched forwards. With Jack at the helm and the winds in their sails, the Black Pearl was cutting through the water and the raging storm like the mistress of the sea as her Captain directed her towards their enemy. The Flying Dutchman was the first to open fire, due to them possessing frontal cannons but Jack, the mad Captain that he was with the favor of the very sea on his side, managed to maneuver her somehow out of the way. He called out orders over the wind while his beloved ship sang in his ears, the two in sync as they entered the faster currents of the maelstrom to gain the edge in this battle.

Jack passed off the helm to Barbossa, who was grumpy at being ordered around by a mere teenager, as he ran off to the main deck when he saw that the Dutchman's mixed crew of Englishman and partially immortal fish men readying to board. He took up his bow and arrow, doused the tip with tar, lit it up and tied one of those special little bombs from Singapore he still had left to the end before firing, calling for cannon fire as soon as he let it rip. His order was echoed around the entire ship and both the Pearl and the Dutchman shook with the results. Jack called to Barbossa to bring her around, not wanting any holes in his own ship as the fire made the little bag explode, taking down two main deck cannons to the depths but leaving the ship utterly untouched. It *was* an indestructible ship. But her crew was not and this volley of attacks, as well as Jack's little archery shot had cost them a good number of the crew. Unfortunately, Beckett had stuffed as many men on the ship as she could take and with every one that was lost to the sea, the Dutchman was lighter and faster.

"We're not moving fast enough! Bring her deeper in!" Sparrow yelled over the wind to the current pilot, clinging to the rigging as the first set of cannonballs hit the deck. Only three men were lost but a part of the railing was destroyed and one of the cannonballs had hit the forecastle, leaving behind a big hole.

"Ye're crazy!" Barbossa yelled in response, too busy keeping her steady to shoot at the now swinging over enemies, so Groves was keeping his back safe, shooting them down with his gun. Jack took another arrow and repeated the earlier process, cursing when he saw he had only one left even as his arrow rid them of one of the triple cannons and two fish men. "She'll be torn apart!"

"She's made of tougher stuff than you know, Hector! Bring her in!" Jack yelled, firing another arrow, this one only set ablaze with no Singapore powder. He winced as the Englishman he'd set on fire started screaming in agony, managing to spread some of the fire on his mates or even on one of Jones' own crew, though theirs was put out quickly enough. The Dutchman lurched forwards as it was her turn to have the wind in her sails as she chased the Pearl in the circling currents and Jack repeated his order to Barbossa again even as he took aim, arrow prepared with fire and that little powder bag, aiming for the Dutchman's main sail when a fish man grabbed hold of him and hauled him into the air. His amazing luck reared its head when his arrow, pointed downwards as it had been in his startlement, when released completely missed his deck, barely the railing when it flew right through the entrance to the ship where the gangplank would usually be and sailed straight into the Dutchman's hull, only inches above the waterline, where it exploded and left a nasty hole that, unfortunately, didn't slow the cursed ship down. James was thankfully near by to cut off the Dutchman's crew member's head and free Jack before the teen could get hurt, pulling him up until they were back to back.

Jack glared down at his crushed bow before sending Barbossa a terrifying glare. Realizing Sparrow had the most to lose if his ship went down - for he would survive and have to mourn all his losses - Barbossa did as he was told, trusting Jack's madness to once again coincide with brilliance and pulled her further in just as they spun around that the wind was in their sails. Ten of the would be boarding crew from the Dutchman missed the deck of the Pearl as she picked up speed, laughing with the battle rush she was experiencing as she easily evaded all of her adversary's attacks. Barbossa laughed when he realized she was holding steady and strong before finally handing the wheel over to the awaiting Mr Cotton, taking out his own cutlass and pistol, lunging at the enemies present on deck.

"It be too late to alter course now, matey!" Jack heard him bellowing at the crew as the two fastest ships in the world raced against each other in the maelstrom. "Dyin' is the day worth livin' for!"

"Your madness must be contagious!" James called over the wind as the crew of the Black Pearl cheered, dealing with a sailor dressed in the EITC's colors, who looked pale at the thought of dueling to the death with the pirate hunter from Jamaica since he'd seen Norrington fight before and knew he was well and truly outclassed.

"Aye, it must!" Jack agreed with a laugh, cutting down one of Jones' crew before being attacked by another. As soon as that one was down, Jack took out his gun and took pity on the man James was fighting, hitting him square in the chest and sending him to a swift death rather than eventually being crushed in the rushing waters below the ships as they tilted more and more at an angle the lower they got. The Black Pearl shuddered when their mainmasts finally collided and entangled themselves, so close and tilted the ships were. Reloading his pistol quickly, Jack tucked it away and pulled James around so they were chest to chest and tugged him down for a desperate kiss. Surprised by it, James didn't get much time to respond before Jack disappeared from his side and was swinging over to the Flying Dutchman, shooting at a man that had aimed at him in return.

"Jack!" The ex Commodore made to follow but found himself facing two of Jones' crew and grit his teeth. He hoped the teen will be able to take care of himself because James couldn't follow him, busy as he was. He was soon engaged in the fight against the two and as good a swordsman as he was, he knew the third one that was approaching maliciously will be too much even for him. Fear made his heart clench as a sad thought occurred to him. He never got to tell Jack how he felt and he never might. He'll leave the teen again, all alone, just when his old lover was taken from him for a second time. Despair made him fight more fiercely than ever but it was soon enough that he got a deep gash to his left arm. Good thing he fought with his right. He grit his teeth, facing his opponents like a man and with pride and dignity as they laughed at his sorry state before one of them had their head cut clean off of their shoulders by none other than Frederico, who then dispatched another one. James took his opportunity and cut down the third cursed crewman, finding himself back to back with the older man once those three were taken care of, only to be replaced with a couple of ordinary EITC soldiers.

"You alright, señor Norrington?" The Spaniard called to the Englishman as they engaged their opponents once again. At least it was a fair one on one fight, all four of them swirling around each other, switching opponents just like dance partners.

"Never better, Mr Sanchez!" They both laughed at the absurdity of their conversation even as they took care of their opponents, shooting two startled ones coming in when Elizabeth called to Barbossa up on the quarterdeck to marry her and Will. James just shook his head at her request, eyes zeroing in on where Gillete seemed to be struggling. "Bloody hell, his madness *is* contagious!" He said even as he and the laughing Sanchez moved to help the struggling Lieutenant and his big brute of a cursed sailor.



"I'm a little busy at th' moment!" Hector was heard yelling just as, on the Dutchman, Jack appeared on the main deck with none other than the Dead Man's Chest in his arms. It had been easy enough to make it to the captain's cabin without being noticed in the mad fray going on up on the upper deck. Jack had encountered only two fish men and one Englishman before he entered the luxurious, cursed cabin with the big organs and two idiot Englishmen (known as Mr Murtogg and Mr Mullroy, a pair Jack would have known had he not been de-aged) whom he easily distracted - more like they distracted themselves after only a couple of words from Jack; bloody idiots. Jack really wondered at the low intelligence rate in this future of his: Barbossa with Pintel and Ragetti and now Beckett with Mullroy and Murtogg. Had the world gone completely mad in the past twenty years? And they call Jack daft - and took the chest. He didn't meet any trouble back on his way up but on the main deck, he found himself surrounded by Davy Jones and his crew. Apparently, Mercer was dead and thrown overboard, finished off by Jones himself, who was now laughing mockingly at the teen.

"Look what we have here. A little bird." Jack's hackles raised in an instant. *No one* but the Silent Mary's crew was allowed to call him little, a bird or a little bird - and that last one was actually reserved only for Armando (he ignored his own logic telling him *birdie* was the same as *little bird* for he didn't care and he had a point to make here). Jones seemed to be enjoying his ire. "A little bird wot never learned t' fly."

"To my great regret," he told Jones sarcastically with a fake little smile even as his eyes burned with anger that had a few of the crew hesitating in their mocking. The ship was now almost clear of EITC agents, a few still engaged in fights with Jack's crew but most fighting over on the Black Pearl. "*But*," Jack said mock brightly as he took a step back, closer to the railing and the lines of the rigging tied securely there. "It's never too late to learn!" He then smashed the indestructible chest against the wood, releasing one of the lines and being propelled upwards, landing neatly on the top mainmast. The Dead Man's Chest overbalanced him for a second before he rightened himself. And not a moment too soon as Jones materialized out of the mast itself, drawing a sword, intent on finally ridding himself of Jack Sparrow once and for all. Jack drew his sword and met his first attack easily, and the next and the next, easily riding the waves under the ship even this high up and during a fight, surprising Jones with his skill. "I can set you free, mate!" Jack said over the wind and Jones snarled at him, making to cut him down.

"My freedom was forfeit long ago." He lunged again, expecting to manage a clear hit, but he didn't know how to fight the older Jack Sparrow, let alone this younger one that actually still took things seriously most of the time. A serious Jack Sparrow as an opponent was unheard of, since he hid it so well, having found life to be a lot easier when people thought you a fool on top of underestimating you. As they dueled, Will, now married to Elizabeth by Barbossa, looked up and saw that Jack, amazingly but not surprisingly, had the chest and was fighting with Jones on top of the top mainmast of the Flying Dutchman. On the Pearl's own top mainmast, Gary was once again acting as a sniper, shooting down all those who tried sneaking up on any of the crew. Ahmed was on the top foremast, throwing his knives with that deadly precision while Lee seemed to be keeping him safe using some of the oddest weapons and techniques Will had ever seen. But Will shook it all off and grabbed hold of a line and swung over the rushing water until he was safely on the Flying Dutchman, just in time for a key on a string of rope, a tentacle still clinging to the black metal, to hit him on the head.

He looked up and gasped when he saw Jack clinging to the chest while Jones tried to shake him off and he quickly grabbed hold of the key, throwing away the angrily writhing tentacle just as Jones flung Jack over his shoulder and one Bootstrap Bill Turner, brainwashed by the curse, approached his son with a raised sword. Forgetting about Jack for the moment, Turner father and son engaged in a duel, one aiming to kill, the other not. Up on the line, swinging along with one of the sea-creatures covered men, Jack was clinging on for his life when the other moved to stab him, only

for him to suddenly let go and fall into the depths. Looking up, Sparrow saw Gary tipping his cowboy hat at him before going back to shooting with more of those strange "YiiiiHaaaa"s of his. Jack just grinned before taking out his pistol and swinging his body around so he would go higher, taking careful aim and firing.

Jones released a high pitched yelp when the shot hit his arm and the chest fell right out of his hands. Jack let his momentum and gravity to bring him down and he caught the chest. Unfortunately, someone shot the rope he was swinging on and he crashed onto the deck, too close to the railing and the abyss below for his liking. To make things worse, the Dutchman's Captain was soon upon him, plucking a cutlass from an EITC soldier's hand and leaving him for his pirate opponent to cut him down, advancing on the sprawled teen, only to be barreled out of the way when Elizabeth came crashing into him with a barrel of rum tied to her line. Knowing where she was going with this, Jack shot at the barrel and pulled Elizabeth with him behind one of the remaining deck guns, covering their heads with his coat as it exploded in Jones' face.

The ancient man snarled at them, his face a bit burnt and his tentacles writhing in agitation as he lunged for them, only Jack had no more shots - not that they'd be all that useful on a man that can't die as long as his heart is safe in this little chest - and his cutlass had been broken by Jones' claw not all that long ago, but Elizabeth was armed and, feeling she owed Jack still for what she had done to him with the whole Kraken ordeal, she jumped to meet Jones' attack, parrying as best as she could and doing her damn best to lead him away from the sprawled teenager. Stronger and larger than her as he was, adding in how fast he was for someone of his stature and curse, Elizabeth soon found herself overwhelmed and Jones threw her against one of the stairways up onto the forecastle deck, dizzy and disoriented from the blow.

"Elizabeth!" Both Jack and Will cried, but she was already too far away from Jack so Turner Junior used his father's own knife to pin the man's sleeve to the railing before rushing off to save his newly wed wife. He stabbed Jones through the chest, in his panic forgetting that such a move won't kill him and the young couple's blood chilled when they heard Jones' cold, cruel laughter. While he was taunting them about their love and how feeble a bond it was, Jack was crawling all over the deck after the damned key Will had so foolishly dropped when he had been fighting his father and so the cut off tentacle had taken hold of it again and was trying to escape. Jack, though, was faster and nimbler on his worst drinking nights and soon got hold of it, just in time to see Jones making as if to stab Will through the heart. Without much thought, Jack unlocked the chest, took out the beating organ and his broken cutlass, and standing just as Jones asked his most famous question.

"Tell me, William Turner. Do ya fear death?"

"Do you?" Jack called over the sound of the battle and the storm, the rain pelting him hard and getting a bit in his eyes but he kept his gaze locked on Jones nevertheless, watching as the Flying Dutchman's Captain's gaze fell on his own heart, held in one of Jack's hands while the other threatened it with the very broken cutlass Jones had destroyed. His two friends smiled in relief, seeing he had succeeded in doing the unthinkable, once again. "Heady tonic, holding life and death in the palm of one's hand, isn't it? Enough to corrupt a man, to make him want more power and condemn his lover to an eternity of imprisonment."

"You're a cruel man, Jack Sparrow." Jones sneered but they could all see the fear in his eyes. In another situation, on another day, by another set of circumstances, Jack would have felt sorry for him. But this man ... He had done too bad many things to be forgiven. From his own lover to the countless nameless people he had left to drift forever between life and death, his crimes were many. Jack would never, *ever* forgive him. Especially not for the way he had treated the Silent Mary and her crew. Especially not for creating the Locker to torture those he was displeased with. Especially not for sinking his lady love. Especially not for the men he so ruthlessly slaughtered

even now.

"Cruel is a matter of perspective," was Jack response and he made to stab the heart just as Jones said "Is it?" and whirled around to push his blade through Will, only for both of their hands to be stopped. Jones was pushed away by a man Jack had not seen since the day the Silent Mary sailed into the Devil's Triangle but who had thought him so much, including the dances he always complained about. Sopping wet, dressed in black, hat in place and his eye still covered by his black eye patch, Lieutenant Lesaro of the Silent Mary pushed the Captain of the Flying Dutchman away from the downed Will with a colorful curse in Spanish as Santos and Moss grabbed hold of Will and Elizabeth, jumped off of the cursed plague ship and carried them over the raging currents, walking on water in a jaw-dropping way all the way to the Black Pearl, just as Barbossa called for the crew to shoot at the Dutchman's mainmast in order to free the black one from its grasp. The black ship jerked and tore free before Barbossa took the wheel from Mr Cotton and started fighting the currents in order for them to go back out of the maelstrom.

"Not with you, my little Sparrow." Armando Salazar told the teen as he leaned down and claimed his lips for a final goodbye kiss before he stabbed the heart with his own cutlass that Jack had not even seen or heard him draw. The Flying Dutchman shuddered under their feet but Jack did not know whether that was because of Jones' howl of pain or because the Silent Mary had used her hull to 'cage' the plague ship, keeping them both up and above even as the ferry of the dead tried to pull them down. "You must go. Your friends are safe and so you must be as well."

"No! Bloody fool! You shouldn't have done that!" Sparrow screamed in Salazar's face, stunned by what he had done. Would the curse even work? Salazar was a ghost, for crying out loud! The sea needed someone to ferry the dead across or else-

"Part of the ship, part of the crew." Jack heard the cursed men chanting, seeing a man that looked a lot like Will under all that sea weed and other aquatic creatures that clung to his person approaching with a knife and the big hammerhead shark with the Dead Man's Chest. Well, that answered that question. Jack still refused to leave.

"I lost you once already today and once more two months ago!" He yelled in his once lover's face, desperately clinging to him as tears streaked down his face. There was no rain to mask them anymore. "I can't lose you again! Please!"

"And I cannot lose you at all." Salazar said even as his men started fighting back the Dutchman's crew, holding them back. He kissed the lad once more before pushing him away, hoping his little Sparrow had actually indeed learned to fly. "Go! If you ever loved me at all, go and save yourself!"

"I won't leave you!"

"You must let me go." Armando told him gently, accepting the younger back into his arms despite urging him to leave. "You must move on. You love too beautifully for you never to love another again. I will not begrudge you falling in love with another. But I *will* begrudge you if you stay deliberately unhappy." He kissed his young lover's hair and quickly took out something from his pocket, keeping it out of view as he swiftly braided it into Jack's hair. "Promise me you will forever remember me and I will be content. And I will be happy, knowing you will chase your happiness. Promise me, my little Sparrow."

Jack looked tearfully, clinging on to what he knew he had to let go before nodding and standing on his toes, pressing a chaste peck on the underside of Armando's jaw. "I promise," he said with sincerity around this thick thing in his voice as he finally *let go* and ran over to where the lines of the sails were. He made quick work of them and sent one last look at the crew that was holding the Flying Dutchman's crew back. "I'll never forget you!" He called out to them and sprung the sails,

letting Calypso's wind take him higher and higher until he was finally fully out of the maelstrom as the raging waters took back what was theirs.

On the deck of the Black Pearl, her crew was keeping a watchful eye out for their Captain and despair had started sinking in when the sea finally calmed but there was no sign of the eccentric man. When James feared all hope was lost Marty called out and pointed at a strange thing in the sky, sailing the wind currents towards them. A sail ripped off the mast and utilized to glide through the air. A bird that finally learned to fly. A sparrow was said to always find its way home. The crew cheered when they saw a familiar looking man hanging on to the four ropes he was using to steer hit the water near the ship and Barbossa called out to Mr Cotton to bring her about. The pirates had all gathered around the plank entrance and were waiting with bathed breath as the new Pirate King climbed aboard, soaking wet and no doubt tired but alright. Gibbs practically shimmied his way to the front, vibrating with excitement and almost knocked off of his feet with relief. He reached down a hand to pull his young friend and Captain up that last little bit already talking a mile an hour.

"Thank goodness, Jack! We thought you lost. Should have known better than to think even the Flying Dutchman can keep ya down! The armada's still out there and I think it's time we embrace that oldest and noblest of pirate traditi-"

"Mr Gibbs, wot the bloody 'ell are ye blabberin' 'bout this time 'round?" Gibbs stopped short, almost not recognizing the deeper, slurring and far less sophisticated sounding voice that once used to be the norm. He stepped back as the Caribbean Pirate Lord clambered to his feet in his usual silly manner and gasps echoed around the gathered crowd when an older set of eyes, set in an older but still young, beautiful face if only with a mustache and a goatee beard were revealed to them as Captain Jack Sparrow of the Black Pearl straightened himself, blinking in confusion at all the people on his ship. "Um, parlay?"

"Capt'n! You're back!" An over enthusiastic Joshamee Gibbs swept up the perplexed man into a bone-crushing hug, making him release a startled yelp he will later deny producing.

"Of *course* I'm back, Mr Gibbs! I'm Captain Jack Sparrow." He said as soon as he managed to pry his first mate off of him with a weary frown. "Where am I back from, exactly?"

The old sailor blinked. "Ye ... Ye don't remember?"

"Did I get drunk again?" Jack blinked back at him, further confused by the sorrowful expressions all around him. Even his Pearl hummed in disappointment. Heck, even *Hector* looked displeased. Why was he here again? "Am I missin' somethin'?"

"You ... really don't remember, Jack?" Will asked hesitantly, feeling the same hurt he had when an eighteen year old Jack hadn't remembered him only maybe ten times worse. That Jack had learned to trust him and Will feared this one never will again. It hurt, a searing pain through his chest perhaps more painful than Jones' stab at his heart ever could have been, to know his friend will never be so open with him again. Not that he exactly deserved it.

"Maybe Tia Dalma's spell wore off too soon?" Elizabeth offered, exchanging sad glances with everyone. She especially looked sorrowfully at James, who stood ramrod still and erect, except for his head that was bowed so his hair, tussled from the storm and their battle, shadowed his eyes. Groves and Gillete looked right uncomfortable to stand beside him.

"Nay, it wore off too late, says I." Barbossa grumbled. The teen Jack hadn't been all that bad and seeing that side of him again and reminded Barbossa why he had followed him as his Captain in the first place, before the mutiny. He wasn't sure he would ever look at his once Captain the same

way ever again. Jack the monkey gave a sad chitering sound when his human namesake stepped away from him as though in disgust. They, too, had gotten along when Sparrow was a teen.

"Tia Dalma? Wot's she got t' do wiff anythin'?" Now Jack was really confused. You'd think he was used to strange things happening to him but this was ... Well, let's just say it took the cake.

"Excuse me," a voice said, a voice Jack knew all too well, and he looked towards the source just in time to see none other than Commodore James Norrington - or was he an ex Commodore again, judging by his garb? - push past the few men standing in the front line and come marching up to the new - not that he remembered *that* now - Pirate King. Without any prelude, he took Jack by the waist with one arm, the hand of the other coming to hold the back of his head. Jack tried to jerk away while his crew watched in interest.

"What are you doing!?" Jack was hardly aware of the slip in his mask, too focused on burning, determined green eyes whose color he found he really liked. James held him strong and tipped his head back while he leaned in.

"Fulfilling a promise." With that, James claimed the pirate Captain's lips with his own and poured as much of his passion and feelings into this one gesture as he could, *desperate* to make Jack remember. Sparrow remained stiff and unmoving for the longest time in his grip before his lips finally, *finally* moved in response, a small moan escaping him as he flung his arms around James in return. Wolf whistles and cat calls and clapping and cheering all surrounded them as they continued kissing, but neither paid it any heed until they had to pull away in need of breathe. They shared the air for the longest moment, still clinging to each other, foreheads pressed together, eyes closed.

When black met green again, a certain Pirate King couldn't stop his smile. "Pirate." James just laughed and held him tighter, for he saw that same twinkle back in Jack's eye as when they had first spent the night together. A round of cheers and applause finally had them separating and Jack focusing back on the matter at hand: the EITC's armada. "Mr Gibbs!"

"Capt'n," the man in question nearly saluted, coming to attention like a true military man.

"Close haul her. Luff the sails and lay her in iron." The orders surprised more than one person but Jack seemed dead serious. He had opened his Compass and was watching the needle as it pointed starboard. Leagues away from them, the armada was still waiting, although they could see the Endeavor had set off to meet them.

"Belay that! We'll be sittin' ducks!" Barbossa protested immediately, storming towards the younger Pirate Lord. "Maybe a good 'it on the old bonkers will get 'is 'ead straight."

"Belay that 'belay that'." Jack answered immediately.

"But the armada-" Gibbs tried to protest or reason with his Captain.

"Belay."

"The Endeav-"

"Belay. Belay. Belay." Sparrow repeated to every attempt at contradicting his orders before finally rising his voice, something no one had ever heard him do before. "Stow. Shut it!" They finally stopped talking and watched uneasily the arrogant approach of the Endeavor.

On said ship, Beckett had ordered for the Black Pearl to be fired upon. "Nothing personal, Jack. It's just good business." Unexpectedly, a little off of the Endeavor's course for the Black Pearl, a

familiar looking ship burst through the surface, coming to rest upon the waves elegantly. "Ah, she survived." Beckett commented in pleasure. He didn't notice the immediate difference to the cursed ship but Jack saw it instantly and grinned like a mad man.

"Ready on the guns!" Capitán Armando Salazar called from the emerged ship, standing tall and proud at her helm, eying their target before they slid towards the distinctive form of one Captain Jack Sparrow as the now grown man walked across his ship in a far too familiar way with a knowing smirk as he rotated his Compass on its leather cord. Salazar smirked as Lesaro called that the guns were ready, the big ship lurching forward.

"Full canvas." Jack ordered smugly, hand reaching into one of his hidden pockets and taking out a small figurine the following Barbossa recognized immediately but still knew nothing about. It didn't matter. He cackled with glee and agreed to the order, Gibbs echoing it across the ship as the two fastest ships on the seven seas raced once more, this time as allies to take down the enemy. Sparrow took the figure and pressed it to his lips, as Tia had once told him to if he wished to unlock its powers, and speedy winds filled both of their sails. The crew seemed far too cheery for a lot that had just faced nearly certain death in the middle of a maelstrom not twenty minutes ago. Jack came to rest his hands on the railing of the quarterdeck, Will, Elizabeth, Gibbs, Barbossa, James and Frederico all flanking his sides, looking out at the new Captain of what used to be the Flying Dutchman but now looked like a bastardized version of it and the Silent Mary, bigger than the Endeavor by a good twenty meters.

As soon as they were in line with the Endeavor between the two ships, Gibbs turned to Jack. "Capt'n?" The crew were all looking at him, awaiting his order. Sparrow grinned almost ferally to his old friend and said one word and one word only.

"Fire."

"Fire!" Gibbs repeated, Will and James joining him in a single voice, the ordered echoed out to all the gun crews and everyone who had a pistol ready.

"Fire!" Salazar yelled on his own ship with Lesaro finishing the chant for them all before the cannons came to life. The wind Jack had released was now focused on slowing down the English ship while the two fastest ships in the sea were left to sail at their normal speeds, wrecking utter chaos on the Endeavor. The marines had already started abandoning ship long before Jack came to be in line of Beckett, who was staring at him wide eyes. Jack took hold of a single line and swung on the rope over the slowly sinking and burning ship, swinging around until he was straight in front of the midget Lord, pistol primed and cocked, aimed at his heart. Cutler Beckett stared at him with a slack face, already having come to terms with his demise but his eyes widened when he saw Jack's mouth moving but could not hear what was being said over the cannons.

Then the shot hit him true and he fell backwards into his downed flag while Jack swung to safety.

The pirates cheered at the big bonfire as the Endeavor sank.

## Chapter 30

There was an outright party on every pirate vessel as soon as the Endeavor all but exploded before their eyes and long before all the Navy ships turned tail and fled. Even without music or grog or whatever else pirates usually used to make a party, just throwing hats, hugging, back thudding, cheering and whistling was enough to create the right atmosphere and the crew aboard the Black Pearl was livelier than on any other pirate ship in the Brethren's fleet. There was even some kissing involved from couples and that, most of all, included Will and Elizabeth. They were sucking each other's faces off and got their own round of cat calls for their efforts.

Philip Gillete and Theodore Groves had been dragged into some silly group dance, holding hands with pirates they had been hunting not much more than a month ago, clapping and laughing and cheering with the lively men. Mr Murtogg and Mr Mullroy, who believed themselves quite clever - and were a bit cleverer than the men they had entered the fight with - dressed as pirates as they were could be seen celebrating with their equals - in stupidity - Ragetti and Pintel. Jack and James, standing by the helm as they were, shuddered at the idiocy those four could get up to all together. They could both already feel insufferable headaches coming on and they hadn't even heard the four idiots interacting yet. Probably for the best. Elizabeth had dragged Will into the dances, twirling and laughing and just generally having fun while Barbossa and Gibbs, surprise of all surprises, were toasting each other for at any point suffering the responsibilities of being Jack Sparrow's first mate. Gary, Ahmed and Lee were cheering and firing some of their left over shots in celebration to match the noise of fireworks coming from the Far East ships or the drumming that came from the African ones. Someone had taken the initiative and had fetched the bug music box they had 'found' during their journey and so even the Black Pearl was washed with a cheery melody. Mr Cotton and his parrot were keeping company with Marty and Jack the monkey while the rest of the crew were just celebrating that they had made it out of this alive.

Jack let his eyes roam the decks of his beloved ship and tried not to show his reaction to how much less people were present. They had lost a good thirty five men in this bloody battle and Jack's anger at Jones and at Beckett returned full force, but his lady love grounded him with her own singing and James' hand on his hip helped distract him. The shorter man looked at the once again younger one, considering all they had been through, both when he had been de-aged and before that. And as lovely as their coupling had been, Jack still felt his cheeks warming more when he recalled all their quiet nights when they couldn't sleep and just spent hours talking up on the deck or even higher in the crow's nest. James Norrington had been the first person Jack had ever told about his relationship with Armando and he will never forget that. Armando had been the Capitán of his heart for so long that Jack had simply hidden him away over the years but still had him right there. He now had a Commodore contending for that very same heart and it filled Sparrow with warmth and fuzziness, making him lean closer to his new lover.

A part of him will always belong to Armando but James was the only one to snatch that other part for himself. And while Jack Sparrow can never really *belong* to anyone, for he is a creature of freedom, perhaps even freedom itself bound in human flesh, these two men had wedged into Jack's heart and have staken claim to it, never letting anyone else try and take it. It was Jack's but they protected it, kept it safe. Perhaps they were its *keepers*. The new Pirate King - *fancy that!* - didn't know how to describe it but he knew both of them were very very special to him and he will never deny it.

"Jamie?" He called even as he watched Gibbs go in search for his hat - what had he been expecting when Jack allowed him to throw his precious hat like that? It was a tribute from his first crew! It was as precious to Jack as any of his other trinkets. Speaking of which, he had some beads to braid

back into place. His bloody teenage self didn't have a bloody beard - leaning against the taller as he was. James' own green eyes were locked on his friends acting with such childish glee, a truly special sight with Philip. He was more rigid than James at his most Commodorial.

"Yes?" He answered distractedly and Jack bit his lip, hesitating for only a second before he said what needed to be said. After all, if even Armando could see it ...

"I love you." He tried to make it as mumbled as possible, wondering perhaps if he could just say it out loud to himself and it would be enough to calm his thudding heart but James, somehow, heard him over all that noise and his head whipped around to stare wide eyed at the tanned man, who refused to look at him. "I ain't repeatin' it, love, so if ye heard, ye heard. If not-"

"I heard." Norrington replied in just as quiet and gentle a voice, wondering why such a defensive reaction should appear so endearing. Probably leftover notions from Jack's little teenage visit. Still, that unexpected admission left him with those so called butterflies in his stomach and a warm feeling filling his chest. "I love you as well."

That worked miracles on Jack's thudding heart and he looked up with a grin at his new lover, giving him a quick peck before stepping away but still staying within arm's reach when none other than Armando appeared in front of them, arms behind his back in what Jack by now knew was a common military commander gesture, studying Norrington from head to toe as he was. James returned Salazar's stare with one of his own and both men had to admit their lover had good taste, although neither found the other quite his type. After all, they had both fallen for the eccentric pirate.

"Armando," Jack said brightly with relief and a little sadness as he knew that the man was now forever cursed as the new Captain of the ... what used to be the Flying Dutchman. Stepping on shore only once in every ten years ... Or would he even have that? He was, after all, first cursed by the Devil's Triangle.

"Little Sparrow." The Spaniard's whole face changed when he greeted his once lover. He studied the changes, drinking in the sight of him like a desperate, thirsty man would gulp down fresh, cool water. "You grew up well, I see."

"And you got yourself a new ship," Sparrow observed unneedingly with a grin, looking out at the concoction that the sea had spit out. The Flying Dutchman looked much, much better than it ever had before, no signs of sea life on it at all, even as its previous crew was still cleaning up some of it off of their person. But the cursed plague ship, which no longer looked like a thing of nightmares, was now nestled in the middle of what used to be the much bigger Silent Mary's main deck. The Spanish galleon was now like a frame for a picture but she was back to her own former glory and they made an interesting combination, especially since there were more masts than on any other ship before. Jack wondered just how well those will be catching wind. His Pearl still stayed the fastest ship in the world, that would hardly ever change. "An interesting one, at that. What is it, twice, thrice cursed? Needs a new name is what it is."

Salazar snorted, shaking his head at the man's antics. A lot bolder than the fifteen year old he had met and a lot sillier than the eighteen year old that had led him to his demise. "I am afraid I don't have the slightest idea what I could call her. I do not possess your way with words, my little Sparrow."

"Flattery will get you nowhere." Jack told him with a dismissive flap of a hand, distracted with thinking up a name as he studied the ship and searched for a certain Turner. As it was, he didn't see the sly smirk that crossed Armando's face. James did and braced himself for whatever this was going to be.



"It sure did get me *somewhere* south that I rather liked."

"*Armando!*" The scandalized pirate snapped, face going straight to cherry red as he gawked at the Capitán, who was laughing at both him and James, who was possibly even redder, knowing what the older man had meant. Jack pouted at the laughing Spaniard and turned away with arms crossed over his chest petulantly, deciding to ignore him as he once again focused on the ship. "Hm, I think the Dutchman's Mary ain't bad. What do you think, Jamie?"

"That you should stop using that infernal butchery of my Christian name." Jack just waved him off dismissively and Norrington sighed, knowing it was a futile battle. "A fitting way to mash up their two names."

"*Si*, I agree." Armando commented with a hum, eyes going between the two new lovers and finding it strange that he felt no true jealousy. Don't get him wrong, he still loved Jack more than mere words could describe, but he would never stand in the way of the younger man's happiness. He only regrets never having become so open-minded as this 'Jamie' was so he could keep his little Sparrow. Yes, he would never turn to piracy but he would not have hunted them so brutally if he could have held his lover every once in a while in his arms. He would have gone after only those who did the most despicable things and maybe, just maybe, none of the tragedies and sorrows of Jack's life would have happened. Salazar knew he was being foolishly selfish, wishing that it could have been a little different. Jack would have never left his ship forever, he loved the Wicked Wench too much for that. To the point that he had sold his soul to Davy Jones just to save her. Salazar had been arrogant to think he can keep his little Sparrow and for the boy to still be happy without this ship under his feet. "I believe this will have to be another goodbye, Jack Sparrow."

Said man's eyes immediately narrowed and he marched up to the newly named Dutchman's Mary's Captain. "Don't. You. *Dare*. Salazar. I've said goodbye to you three times this day. You're not getting away so easily this time." He said with authority, staring the taller man down while James just watched the proceedings with interest.

"It cannot even be a 'see you later', Jack." It was extremely rare for Armando to use his given name so Jack stayed quiet and listened. "We cannot step on land. At all. You have nothing to wait for even if you did not already have a new lover."

"I don't really recall a time I've stayed on land longer than a week, so I fail to see why you can't pay us a visit. I'm Calypso's favorite human in the entire world. She'll let you take a few days off every now and then for a visit." With a conspirational wink at James, who just arched an eyebrow and watched, Jack leaned in closer to the Spaniard until his breath was caressing the taller man's ear. "*Quiero beber contigo toda la noche, mi Capitán.*"

Armando went stiff as a board, in more ways than one, old habits never dying. He was sure he heard familiar snickers of his crew, including Frederico who had went to greet Lesaro and the other Lieutenants when they had also stepped on board. The pirates were all nervously twitchy and silent as the grave, not daring to make a sound for fear of angering the Butcher of the Sea. Said man looked down to the Pirate King, whose eyes were twinkling mischievously but with a knowing glint that said Jack knew he had won with that one single sentence. Like all the other times. "That will not work this time, little Sparrow."

Judging from how breathy and rough his voice had become, James thought it had more than worked and shook his head. Truth be told, he wondered how this strange love triangle - there was irony in there somewhere, the Englishman was sure - was going to work. He couldn't begrudge the two lovers still have some semblance of feelings for each other. He was actually a bit glad for them. And he had no reason to be jealous. Jack had just told him he loved him and James had

nothing against sharing his lover occasionally. Call him selfish for being glad Salazar's visits will be few and far in between but Norrington rather liked the idea of Jack being his more often. Even if Salazar visited once a month, that was only twelve days a year while James had Jack all to himself for the rest of it.

"It won't?" Norrington thought Jack fluttering his eyelashes was a bit too much and had to stop himself from snorting. He hoped *he* never ended up so whipped. It was *embarrassing*.

"Give it up, Capitán! You're helpless at his feet!"

"Shut up, Moss, or I will string you up by your toes from the mainmast!" The El Matador Del Mar snapped at said man, who was grinning lecherously and making rude, lewd hand gestures that finally broke the tension among the pirates and they snickered. Jack himself was somewhere between snickering and a giggling fit as his undead lover glowered at his crew. James let himself chuckle as well and just shook his head.

"Capitán," Frederico greeted as he and the Lieutenants of the Silent Mary finally climbed up to the quarterdeck, giving his superior officer a salute. "Permission to stay with the crew of the Black Pearl until my last breath allows me to join yours?"

"Frederico, you look well." Armando returned the greeting before giving a nod. "Of course. I would appreciate it if you kept my little Sparrow out of trouble. Although seeing as he will be searching for immortality-

"Wait just one bloody second! I never said anythin' 'bout findin' th' Fountain of Youth!" Jack protested and everyone fell silent, *very* interested in the prospect of immortality. Armando snorted.

"You needn't say it. Besides, you will need it." He turned around and took something from Lesaro before facing Jack again. Both the Pirate King and his new British-born lover were flabbergasted to see none other than the Dead Man's Chest held out towards the former, a faint *thud-thu-thud* sound coming from within. At the incredulous stare he got from the dreadlocked male, Armando just smiled lovingly. "It was always yours. No one else can have it." No one bothered to ponder how a solid ghost had a now beating, living heart when just an hour ago he didn't. Curses were strange like that.

"Armando," Jack breathed in disbelief as it was all but shoved into his arms. "I can't-"

"Your debt to the Dutchman has been repaid. Your ship is yours, Captain Sparrow." The Spaniard said formally but with pride and affection in his eyes. "You have indeed become the worthy opponent I had thought you to become one day. Never change, Pirate King Jack Sparrow." With that, Salazar turned to leave but Will called out for him to wait. A little uneasy when stared at by those almost black eyes, the young blacksmith still held his ground.

"What about my father?"

"Which one is he?" Armando asked with a nonchalant sweep of the deck on his new ship. He spotted one man that greatly resembled the young man he was speaking with, the only true difference between them the man's slouched form and blue eyes.

"Bootstrap Bill Turner." Jack and Will said as one, the Captain waving at his old friend with a grin. William Turner Senior laughed as he waved back, Armando watching the exchange with interest. "An old friend of mine." The Caribbean Pirate Lord explained before another face caught his eyes. "Is that-? Governor Martinez!?" Jack ran over to the railing and frowned mournfully at the obviously dead man who was smiling at him affectionately. "No."

"Lopez got him killed." Salazar said, his face contorting in disgust at the mere mention of the traitor's name. "You needn't worry yourself about that scum. He's fish food for the sharks of the Devil's Triangle. Governor Martinez chose to stay as part of the crew, since he was killed on a ship and, as such, out at sea."

"Should have just let Frederico run him through," Sparrow shook his head. "I'm surprised *he* wasn't so surprised that I acted like 'Jaquelin' again. I kind of told him the truth a few months after ... the battle." He hesitated for a second. "He told me he loved me too much to see me hanged or hunted and as such gave me a safe harbor in San Angelica. Please don't be angry with him?"

"For keeping you safe and alive? Never." Armando replied while gesturing for Bill to get over to the Black Pearl. "You may have your father back, señor Turner. Seeing as he had never died, he is free to go." He didn't turn around to listen to Will's thank yous, instead focusing on his once and maybe again, you never know, lover. "If you need me, call me. The heart is all you need." He kissed Jack's cheek before he marched back like a true military man onto his ship. "Now, if you excuse me, I do believe that scum Davy Jones has left a lot for me to do. James Norrington," he called over his shoulder. "You better treat my little Sparrow right or not even immortality and staying on land will keep you safe. My little Sparrow-"

"Don't call me that in front of *everyone*!"

"I will treat your mermaid friends well. Do go to the Fountain soon, ¿*si*? Frederico, you know what to do."

"Capitán," the man acknowledged even as he waved goodbye to his old crew mates. On the Dutchman's Mary, the rest of the crew were also waving to him and Sparrow with cheerful expressions even as Santos pushed Jones' old quartermaster down to the brig.

"Señor Gorrion," Lesaro tipped his hat as he passed Jack. "I do hope you still remember how to dance."

"¡*Vete a la mierda!*" That response only sent the Spaniards all into peals of laughter even as they said their farewells to their two friends. The pirates all watched as the Dutchman's Mary sailed off towards the horizon, disappearing with a flash of green light as though it had never been there before. Jack sighed and looked down at the chest. "Where the bloody hell am I to put this, then? We get attacked *way* too often to keep it with me. But I can't go and bury it like Jones did. Right disrespectful, that." He mused. His chambers in his family home at Shipwreck Cove were out of the question. As secure as they were, what with the place originally being the home of the first ever Pirate King and his family of Pirate Lords that followed, even the *Code* had once been stolen out of that place. He'd rather not think on that event. And he'd even less want to think about the heart being stolen. "And I can't let the merfolk take it, either. They're *his* servants now. Bugger. I'll actually have to keep it with me."

"You are *not* keeping it in the great cabin." James crossed his arms, indicating he was putting his foot down on this. Jack cocked an eyebrow at him.

"Would you prefer it in the *captain's* cabin?" At the silence, Jack huffed. "Didn't think so." He grinned over at the happy family reunion between father and son. "Welcome back, Bootstrap!" He left them to it and instead marched off towards his cabin, hips sashaying as they always do with James going after him and Gibbs falling in step with him.

"Capt'n, do we have a headin'?" The first mate asked. Jack paused and looked over his extended crew and then at the still present and still celebrating other pirates. The Misty Lady stood out in all her glory and he tried imagining his father's expression. They had quite a few things to talk about,

especially with Jack's new position. Then there was the matter of Sao Feng, who was being carefully kept between two of the many ships that sailed under a black flag with crossed cutlasses, and his treachery. They'll need to look over candidates for a new South China Sea Pirate Lord. And Jack had no doubt his father wanted a word or none with Barbossa regarding the marooning. Good thing he didn't know about him and James. His Da was a *tad* overprotective. Not to mention he can't keep all these men on board. It will slow the Black Pearl down and he rather liked the crew he had picked up as a teenager. They seemed like a good lot.

"Aye, we do. Set course fer Shipwreck Cove. I've some unfinished business t' attend to." He replied before walking into his cabin and telling James to close the doors behind them. He put the chest down on the map table, right next to an unexpected gift. Jack picked up the little music boy locket Tia Dalma always kept close and fingered it, feeling something akin to a warm breeze brush over his very soul. He smiled at the locket and placed it into one of his hidden pockets, along with the little stone head figurine, hiding them from sight. He might pick up wearing it in the memory of the sea goddess and the man she loved, whom she in the end reclaimed as her own for eternity. It will just be another memento, another memory he kept close to him, like the completely black pearl that now hung from one of his dreadlocks. He brushed a finger over it before looking at his James, who was looking at the Dead Man's Cheat with a half haunted look on his face. "I don't begrudge you for taking it, you know. I just pity you for thinking it would be for the best to hand it over to Beckett." He commented as he took off his effects and lay them next to the chest. He won't be needing them for a while.

"I caused all of this. So much death could have been avoided, including yours." Norrington said with a shake of his head as he sat down heavily in the very same chair he had occupied just the night before. It seemed like forever ago and it had not even been a full day. "I'm sorry, Jack. I messed up."

"'Tis okay, love." Jack said as he sashayed his way over and plopped down in the younger man's lap. Deft fingers started playing with one of the ex Commodore's buttons, even as he kissed his cheek in reassurance. "It's only human to make mistakes. Just ... try to learn something from all of this, savvy?"

"I think I learned quite enough, thank you." James said even as he wound his arms around the tanned man's waist. "Although I have no doubt there is a lot more to learn still." He added with a pointed look to all the mementos Jack wore but his teenage self had not known anything about, a hand teasingly traveling upwards to brush at some of his tattoos.

"Always more, love." Jack agreed and made a small triumphant sound when the button he'd been playing with came free. "Ah ha!"

"What are you doing?" The confused Englishman asked as he watched Jack weave it into his hair, not sure whether he should try to take back the button or just let it be.

"Need somethin' of ye wiff me, savvy?" The pirate Captain replied with a small grin. "An' ye, love? Wot will ye be doin'? If ya want t' leave, Shipwreck Cove will be yer last chance fer a while. I'll be chasin' th' horizon fer a while now that I'm free as a bird."

"While I *have* been press ganged by your friends-

"Oh dear." Jack interrupted him with a wince. That went against some of the rules of the Code and he would have been better off not knowing so he could remain oblivious rather than turn a blind eye to it. He *can't*. Kind of ingrained into him as the Keeper's Heir. "I guess it'll be bilge duty for them for a month. Can't be more merciful than that."

James also winced, more so for Elizabeth as a lady - however former that may be now - and Marty, whose short legs will leave him neck deep in the water that usually seemed in through there. "Isn't that worse than death?" It tended to reek, no matter what ship it might be.

Jack looked offended, probably on the behalf of his ship because he *knew* what James was thinking. "I'll have you know my lady's bilge is the same as it had been when she was built, sir." He sounded almost like that time he had asked Gibbs why there was a lack of discipline on his ship, back when they had just found him in the Locker. "We don't even have any rats, or have you not noticed."

Norrington just shook his head. Of course, he should have expected such a response. Jack was possibly the most attentive Captain in the world, for he loved his precious Black Pearl above all else. Of *course* the only punishment from bilge duty would be that those punished would just not get to see the light of day for a while. "Anyway, even though I hadn't exactly come on this trip of my own choosing, I wasn't exactly complaining, either. And I don't regret it. I don't see why I would want to leave. I'll have with Philip and ... Well, not Theo. He'll be staying. He might annoy you for more stories now that you have all your memories back." A hand came to caress where his button rested now, on a braid right next to the black pearl. "I might want to hear some of those stories myself."

Jack smiled warmly at him with gentle eyes. "I might share a tale or two." He then grinned wickedly and leaned in to lick James' ear, setting off a fire in his belly in an instant. "For a price."

"I think we can arrange something," he replied, voice fairly a growl as he pulled Jack closer and drew him into a deep kiss. Needless to say, no one disturbed them until Jack was needed at the helm for the Crossing.

It was a new start in the world of piracy. A new Golden Age of Piracy, so to say. The Flying Dutchman's captain's story was retold a thousand times in every port as did spread the rumors of the new ferrying ship, the Dutchman's Mary and her new crew, all ghosts and undead men. El Matador Del Mar's faked demise at the hands of mother nature was changed by the man himself, striking up quite a stir among those in Spain. Shipwreck Cove, thankfully, emptied of unwanted company within the month and Sao Feng was stripped of his status and marooned with Tai Huang and his men on some godforsaken island no one visited. Sao Feng *was* thankful, in the end, that it had been Jack Sparrow who punished him, loath as he was to admit it. Seeing as Captain Teague had wanted to leave him on one of the islands with cannibals, Jack had been merciful. Barbosa was sent all the way to the Caspian Sea and forbidden from leaving it unless the Brethren Court is to convene again. Jack had given him a ship and a loyal crew as a thanks for fetching him back from the Locker and they parted on amiable enough terms to not try to kill each other if they ever crossed paths again. The three Turners stayed on the Black Pearl and nine months later, when Armando finally had a chance to come visit again - Jones had left him *a lot* of work to do - it was to the sight that sent him straight into a faint, Jack Sparrow holding little newborn William Henry Turner while James tended to the tired Elizabeth and Frederico helped Gibbs in trying to rouse the proud father and grandfather. Jack had just rolled his eyes at him and continued to rock his honorary nephew. Perverted Spaniard.

Armando kept visiting every few months for the next couple of years, sometimes his visits lasting only for a single drink with his little Sparrow, other times the Pirate King would join him in his cabin and they would renew what they always had feared was lost. Norrington and Salazar got on surprisingly well but they still resisted that threesome Jack's been trying to get them to agree to. No worries, he was Captain Jack Sparrow! He'll manage it one of these days. By the time Elizabeth fell pregnant again when little Willy was five, Jack finally set course for the Fountain of Youth. They had, miraculously, not lost any of the crew Jack the teen had picked up and so the entire crew of

the Black Pearl, save Frederico - who was still set on one day joining Salazar's crew again - drank from its life giving waters, agreeing to come here again if any new friends or loved ones were to join Turner kids were to be the first on the list. And while they were docked in Whitecap Bay, his crew enjoying themselves with lusty mermaids in need of a mate, Jack had sat with Lucia and Regina and they sang to the music of Calypso's locket that now never left Jack's neck. Lucia never did fall out of love with Jack, but she did mate one day, for a young mermaid had accompanied her on one of her meetings with Jack, called Jaquelin and insisting she will one day marry Jack just like her mother had at her age, much to said mother's amusement and Jack's fond exasperation. James and Armando certainly hoped *this* one would turn out to be an ordinary crush.

Speaking of James, he *did* learn about the other tattoos and the trinkets in Jack's hair. Some of the stories surprised him, others he had half expected but he was grateful to learn them all the same. His father died not ten years after Beckett's war against piracy, thinking his son dead, and everything went to Flitzwiliam P. Dalton III, James' cousin and Jack's first betraying friend. They actually visited him once, when Jack and Captain Teague went to Europe to hunt for the infamous Blackbeard and his ship, Queen Ann's Revenge. Flitzwiliam had nearly had a heart attack when he saw his supposedly dead cousin and the friend he had once long ago betrayed. They hadn't stayed long, just long enough to get chased all around London for a few days before Jack finally got bored of stealing from all those stiffes and they sailed away. They caught Blackbeard trying to make his way through Whitecap Bay and left him to the mermaids to deal with. Armando was not amused to have to deal with so many dead when he came but Blackbeard put him in even a fouler mood as he sailed away with this new batch of souls.

Jack never did ask if he ever got rid of the Locker.

As the years went, the Pearl got a few more passengers and lost Frederico to old age. They gave him a honorable burial at sea and saw him again, two months later in the company of Martinez and Lesaro as the Dutchman's Mary surfaced beside the Black Pearl for one of Salazar's visits. There were still nights when Jack or James couldn't sleep and they both somehow ended up in the crow's nest again, talking, kissing or just snuggling until morning light. And there were some days when James would find Jack listening to Calypso's music box locket on his own but smiling out at the horizon as waves teasingly splashed higher, as though to caress his face like Tia Dalma used to. James always wondered if the sea goddess had visited him but left when someone else approached. Jack never talked about it and James didn't prod so no one ever learned the truth. Other times, while at the helm, Jack would be found conversing with seemingly himself but after having drank the waters of the Fountain of Youth, his crew could now hear the Black Pearl's humming answers. None could ever hear her as clearly as Jack could, not even that one shaman they once transported from the Caribbean to India. But, then again, he didn't have the soul deep connection to the black ship like the Pirate King had.

Jack, just when young Henry got married to Carina *Barbossa* of all people, finally insisted his own father go to the Fountain of Youth. Neither Keeper nor Keeper's Heir had taken up a pupil to pass on the care of the Code to and Jack could not do it as Pirate King. So Jack's entire family save his Grandmama, who wished to join her husband in the afterlife, traveled on the Black Pearl and the Misty Lady. Unfortunately, due to a freak storm which was followed by an attack by the British Royal Navy, only Jack, his Da and uncle made it to the Fountain. Valerie went down protecting Jack and his Aunt McFlaming was crushed under a fallen beam on the Misty Lady. His other uncle, Captain "Ace" Brannigan, aunt Hazel and his twice removed cousin Mabeltrude were shot to death. Teague didn't seem much bothered by Patriarch's death, as that meant all the loot was now his, Jack's and his younger brother's, which he believed to be more than fair as he and Grandmama had brought in most of it anyway, as did his father and his grandfather before him. "Quickdraw" McFlaming's kids were not very sad about their mother's passing when the three Teagues came home and told them what had happened although Grandmama *was* sad to see them

go. She died a few months later in her sleep.

Over the years, some of the Turner kids decided they don't want to live forever and left the Black Pearl to live on land. They got visits for the holidays by their relatives and some times, they went out to sea. As the decades and then centuries passed, Elizabeth, Will and Henry and Carin retired to Shipwreck Cove while some of their descendants still sailed with Jack all over the world, occasionally visited by Armando. Jack and James actually tied the knot, in a manner of speaking, cementing their bond in front of Teague himself, which had been rather interesting with how many threats the overprotective father could place in a single 'you can kiss your partner'. Piracy as it was started dying out, ships with sails slowly being replaced by ships with motors, old sea tales being forgotten more and more with each day, many 'wild' tribes being whipped out. Some of the sea's treasures were lost, others were protected by Jack and the Turners back in the Cove. Mermaids rarely ever swam out of Whitecap Bay these days and most of the world didn't even know it existed. Calypso protected Shipwreck Island from new, modern mechanic ways of detection in the two great big World Wars, in which the Black Pearl acted as a ferrying service for the survivors of all sorts of attacks until the nuclear bomb incident. Ten years they spent in the Cove, waiting for the waters to calm and by the time the Black Pearl sailed again, all that was left of piracy was a form of terrorism and slave trafficking.

The Code was forgotten. Wooden ships were gone, rare few boats were left. No more Pirate Lords and no more Brethren Court. The mystical sea creatures hid from men and the myths were thrown away for hard facts and science. The entrance towards World's End was destroyed as the ice started melting due to the global warming problems. Humans started polluting the sea and politicians pushed their noses where it isn't their place. Cruses were replaced by quicker air travel and pirate stories and songs may as well have never existed for how little was known of pirates in this modern age.

But if you look towards the horizon at sunset, you can still see the green flash. If you watch it long enough on some days, perhaps you will see a black ship out in the distance. If you listen hard enough, the waves will sing songs to you that will break your heart. And if you search long enough, perhaps you will find an adventure. If you see a strangely dressed man, with kohl lined eyes, tanned from the sun with all sorts of trinkets in his hair, a silver crab-heart shaped locket around his neck and a Compass that doesn't point north at his hip, then you will know you have seen a legend. If a tall man with green eyes and a military bearing walks by his side, you will know the legends are true. And if a ship with black sails sails in the corner of your eye before disappearing from sight, you will know where to find the truth. For the Pirate King still lives somewhere out there, still sails the seas and chases the horizon. His crew still sing the same old songs and drink the good ol' rum. The sea gods still smile upon them and they still see the legendary ferry boat to the other side.

Piracy may be long gone but their story still lives on, all thanks to a boy once named Jack (little, by a chosen few) Sparrow that became a legend. So don't mourn a long gone age for the spirit of their freedom still echoes in our day.

Savvy?

**THE END**

Works inspired by this [sparrowhawk](#) by [Secret Star](#)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!

